

HalfLife 2: Crossroads

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Summary: Two decades after the Black Mesa Incident, Gordon Freeman is awakened by the G Man. But he isn't alone: Corporal Adrian Shephard has also been restored and sent to City 17. Now both must set out to shatter the Combine stranglehold on Earth.

1. Prologue: Simultaneous Resurrection

It stretched on forever, this void.

It never ended. Sometimes it consisted of utter, pitch darkness that completely dominated his vision, to the point where he couldn't even see his hand in front of his face. Other times it was full of a searing white light that wreaked havoc on his retinas and made it hurt to open his eyes. Sometimes it was dark, but punctuated by soft white lights that flickered in the air and streamed past his floating body like shooting stars. He could never decide which was worst; after being confined in this hellish realm for so long he had exhausted his mind with constant thinking. It was the only activity available to him in this void, and he had seized upon it desperately, like a drowning man to a life jacket. However, now it had gotten to the point where even thinking had lost its appeal.

So he floated along in the ever-changing landscape, limp and devoid of energy, as he watched the darkness change to light, the light to darkness, and everything in between. At first he had yelled for help, screamed until his throat was aching and raw, but it made no difference. No one came. He had long since stopped speaking, but he did mutter a few words here and there, just to hear the sound of his own voice, to assure himself he was still there. Each time his gravelly voice grew weaker, less distinct. Sometimes it would echo around him infinitely, rebounding off nothing. Other times the sound would simply vanish out of the air like wind snuffing out a candle flame. One more asset lost to him.

So he floated.

_Days turned into weeks, weeks to months, months to years " ha!
What years? he asked himself. Does time even exist here? No, my good
friend, amigo, comrade, ha ha " time has packed its bags and left
down, caught the last train headed to nowhere, ridin' the rails to
"_

"_Rise and shine, Mister Freeman. Rise and shine."_

_The sound was so unexpected, so alien, that Gordon jolted in
surprise. He opened his eyes and saw a figure before him, outlined
and magnified by the shooting bands of white light that streamed past
him. A crisp blue/grey business suit covering a very tall and thin
physique, a dark red tie fastened at the neck of extremely pale skin,
short-cropped brown hair in a military crew cut, an inconspicuous
briefcase clutched in his right hand " it was him, the
G-Man._

"_Not" that I wish to imply you have been sleeping on" the job.
No one is more deserving of a restttt. And all the effort in the
world would have gone to waste until" well, let's just say your
hour has" come again."_

What the hell is he talking about? _Gordan wondered, staring into the
G-Man's icy blue-green eyes. His voice twitched and started in that
peculiar fashion of his, and Gordan speculated, not for the first
time, exactly what kind of creature he was. For he was certainly not
human; that had been proven a _long_ time ago._

_Gordan suddenly realized that images were flashing behind the G-Man,
who was now almost transparent: a strange electrical beam piercing a
metal apparatus (Gordan felt an uncomfortable wrench in his stomach
as he realized it resembled the resonance cascade), giant hulking
transport tubes that moved silently along a dark metal rail, dark
blue ridged walls extending up as high as he could see, and moving
along below in the darkness the thin, razor-like shape of a
train" _

_The G-Man was speaking again. "The right man in the wrong place can
make all the dif-ference" in the world."_

_A strange heaviness began to overcome his floating body. "What are
you doing?" Gordan tried to shout, panicked, but his voice failed
him; after all, he hadn't used it for the better part of a year. Then
again, he really had no idea how long ago he had used it. It could
have been a day for all he knew. He had no concept of time in that
endless void._

_The G-Man did not answer, merely gave him a cryptic smile as his
outline solidified and slowly began to drift into the distance. "So
wake up, Missster Freeman. Wake up and" smell the
ashes."_

"_Wait!" he tried to call, but suddenly the G-Man was gone, and he
was enveloped in a blinding white light" _

_ x x x x
>

_Someplace either close or far, another dormant figure drifted off
through nothingness. His eyes were shut tightly. _Where am I? _he

wondered, for the millionth time. _What is this place?

He couldn't even describe it. It hurt to try. The constant isolation and silence of this place tore at his nerves, his mind, his heart. It would have consumed a lesser man long ago, but he refused to lose himself to this deadened void. The only thing tying him to his humanity was his burning, unquenchable desire to be free.

He tried to picture Earth in his mind. A sunlit park, a laughing couple reclining under a tree as rain poured from the sky, his mother sliding a slightly burnt chicken from the oven and placing it before him as a small boyâ€¦|

Don't.

_He gritted his teeth, the desire to be home nearly insatiable. _I need to be out of this. Out of here. God, let me out of this forsaken hellholeâ€¦|

And like an answer to his prayers, the voice spoke.

"_Well, well, you ssseem to haveâ€¦| drifted off there for a second. Now is not the _time_ to be relaxing."_

He opened his eyes to stare contemptuously at the figure before him. The G-Man smiled slightly, and the man felt a sharp twinge of fear. The smile wasn't benevolent or encouraging, it was a grimace.

"_I agree that you have earned the right to resttttt, but there are matters atâ€¦| hand which require immediateâ€¦| concentration," the G-Man continued. "I require a further in_dulgence_ on your part. Rather than allowing you the illusion ofâ€¦| choice, you will be sent to finish yourâ€¦| job. There are worse alternativesssss, of course."_

The man still didn't reply, but instead glared at the G-Man in a manner that clearly stated he wished him a painful death. His helpless anger seemed to amuse the G-Man, and he snickered. The sound was like twigs cracking.

"_Still full of attitude, Iâ€¦| see. My employers require your attendance at the presssent moment." His body suddenly felt unbearably heavy. White light began to envelop him, and the G-Man was soon lost to its glare._

"_You still have a partâ€¦| to playâ€¦| Adrian Shephard."_

2. Point Insertion

A loud blaring horn and a shrill screech of tires on rails were the first noises he heard as the white light slowly dissipated from his vision. The floor underneath him (he knew it was floor, not earth, for it was hard and uncompromising) vibrated gently under his feet. His limbs felt stiff, heavy, and were filled with aching pains. His muscles had seized up. Twitching his neck painfully, Gordon looked around. He was on a train. And he wasn't alone. Up ahead of him, further along in the car, were two other passengers. One was dark skinned, bearded, and had dirty, unkempt black hair. He was clutching a battered suitcase in one hand, holding the metal railing with the

other. The second passenger was white, hunched over on the red fabric seat, holding a second identical suitcase in his lap. Both men looked positively disheveled and dirty, and were dressed in identical light blue clothes. Looking down, Gordon saw with a slight shock that instead of his customary Hazard Suit, he too was dressed in the unexpressive blue pants and shirt that the others wore.

"Didn't see you get on," the black one said, looking him up and down with tired eyes. Gordon opened his mouth to respond, but only a hoarse grunt came out; he was too overcome with the mere sight of another human being. After spending so long in stasis the simplest things seemed like miraculous luxuries.

"Iâ€¦" Gordon couldn't finish his sentence. His voice sounded alien to his own ears. "Uh, where's this train headed?"

"You mean you don't know?" the white guy at the end of the car asked incredulously, staring at him. Gordon shifted awkwardly. "No."

"This is my third transfer this year," the black one said. "We're being relocated by the Combine. We left City 14 three days ago, and we should be arriving at City 17 in a few minutes."

"No matter how many times I get relocated, I never get used to it," the man sitting down said quietly, holding his suitcase tightly.

Relocated? Combine? City 14 and 17? Gordon's head was swimming; he had absolutely no idea what the man was talking about. _Just how long was I out?_ he thought.

"You're beingâ€¦ relocated?" Gordon asked. This time his voice didn't startle him as much, but it still felt weak and unused. "Is there a war going on or something?"

This time both men stared at him with such astonishment that Gordon felt like a stupid and ignorant child. "You don't know about the invasion by the Combine?"

Unwilling to speak and sound foolish again, Gordon simply shook his head. Both civilians stared at him for a long time. Neither spoke. Gordon flushed and had to look away.

"You'll find out soon enough," the white one said finally, looking at the floor. Gordon didn't try to pry an answer out of him. Instead, he turned and looked out the train window, where he could see a large, sprawling metropolis stretched out before him. Pressing his nose against the dirty glass, Gordon could barely discern the shapes of people walking around on the streets below. In the heart of the city, a huge black tower stretched up into the sky, its peak lost in the clouds. Tiny black dots flew out of the tower at regular intervals. Overcome with the unfamiliar sights and sounds, Gordon examined some of the scenery flashing by. Many modern looking buildings, telephone poles, plazas and apartmentsâ€¦ the city looked relatively Eastern European, but he had no way to be sure.

Suddenly a loud groan interrupted his thoughts and the train began to slow down. Gordon looked away from the city and saw that they were entering a small train station. Another stationary train was parked up ahead.

"Well, end of the line," the black guy said, and the train came to a stop alongside the other one. The seated man got to his feet heavily and made his way towards the door. Not wanting to be left on his own in this strange place, Gordon followed. The sliding doors opened with a whir, and Gordon followed the two men out into the train station.

Almost immediately, a large black thing flew towards his face and emitted a blinding flash; cursing, Gordon shielded his smarting eyes, glaring up at the basketball-sized whirring machine. The black guy walking ahead of him glanced back, slightly bemused.

"All the first time citizens do that," he said. "What is that thing?" Gordon asked, looking up at it as it slowly flew over his head. "A city scanner," the man replied. "They're the Combine's way of monitoring the citizens. Basically, flying security cameras. The Combine uses them for surveillance, reconnaissance, and to hunt down missing or wanted citizens."

Gordon looked over his shoulder as the scanner flew overhead. It was flying towards a large group of people behind him who had also disembarked from the train. All of them were dressed like he was, and similarly dirty and ragged, clutching their scant possessions. The scanner swooped low over their heads, every now and then emitting a blinding flash and sweeping a searchlight over the citizens.

As Gordon walked forward with the others, they came to a small check-in station. A large television or monitor was situated at the top of the station. Looking up at it, Gordon received a shock: on the screen was none other than the old Administrator of Black Mesa, Dr. Wallace Breen!

"Welcome. Welcome to City 17," Breen was saying into the screen. "You have chosen, or been chosen, to relocate to one of our finest remaining urban centers. In fact, I thought so much of City 17 that I elected to establish my administration here, in the citadel so thoughtfully provided by our benefactors. I have been proud to call City 17 my home. So, whether you are here to stay, or passing through on your way to parts unknown, welcome to City 17. It's safer here."

On the screen, the message began to repeat itself. "Hey," Gordon asked the guy in front of him as they reached the check-in station. "What's Breen doing addressing the entire city?"

"Oh, you know Breen, do you?" the man said bitterly. "He's the self-appointed leader of Earth now, he is. Course, the Combine rules over him, but he still has power over all the citizens. Bastard," he added as an afterthought. Gordon managed to nod, but inside his head his brain was whirring rapidly. He needed to find someone who would explain everything to him.

Gordon looked around the check-in station, and to his surprise saw several men who looked like metro cops up ahead at a turning gate. They were dressed in black bulletproof vests and green pants, along with black leather boots. Each had a pistol holstered at their waist, along with a variety of other gadgets: handcuffs, flashlights, standard police gear. Each officer was holding a small stun baton, with a blue electrical current buzzing at one tip.

I wonder who they are, Gordon thought. As he watched one of them stepped forward and tore a suitcase from a citizen's hands, tossing it unceremoniously onto the dirty ground. "First warning, move away," the officer said flatly, and Gordon shuddered inwardly when he heard his voice. It was garbled and mechanical, as if it was coming through some sort of voice distorter or transmitter.

"But this stuff, it's all I have left," the citizen protested, and as Gordon watched, the officer shoved him roughly into a stack of suitcases. The luggage cascaded to the floor, and the man stumbled back. "I said move it!" the officer snarled. "All right, all right, I'm moving, jeez," the man muttered, slinking through the gate flanked by two officers. Gordon felt a chill in his bones. Whoever these cops were, they were ruthless.

Gordon looked around the station again. At the far side of the room there was a fenced in area with two metro cops surveying a hunch-backed janitor wearing thick metal restraints as he mopped the floor. Gordon peered closer. There was something about the janitor...

The figure turned slightly and Gordon felt as though something had hit him in the stomach.

A Vortigaunt!

The alien slaves he had encountered in Black Mesa, he had learned, were called Vortigaunts. The creatures in Black Mesa had had mottled green-brown skin, sharp claws and teeth, and a third arm protruding from their chests. Their faces were dominated by a huge red glowing eye, surrounded by five smaller ones. They had also tried their very hardest to kill him. However, upon inspecting their carcasses Gordon had noticed that they all wore green collars and wrist bands, as though they were slaves and being controlled. Which they were, he later found out through the Nihilanth. However, with the Nihilanth's death, Gordon assumed they would have been freed.

Looks like this one is a slave of the Combine...

Both men he had been on the train car with were processed next, with the police officers confiscating their suitcases and adding them to the luggage rack. When it was Gordon's turn, they merely waved him through "he had no suitcase. "Move along," one of them said in his distorted voice, waving the stun baton uncomfortably close to his face.

Gordon ventured through the gates. Both officers on either side of the gate leered at him through their white masks and dark goggles as he passed through. A middle aged woman was on the other side of the gate, her fingers hooked through the metal, avidly staring at the citizens lining up for processing. There weren't many, Gordon saw now, only about twelve. "Were you the only ones on that train?" the woman asked him hopefully. Gordon nodded.

"Overwatch stopped our train in the woods," the woman said in a despairing tone. "They took my husband for questioning. They said he'd be on the next train" "I'm not sure when that was. They're being nice though, letting me wait for him"

Gordon felt badly for the woman, but there was nothing he could do for her. Squeezing her shoulder gently, he walked onwards. The two men from his train car were gone now. Gordon hurried through the decrepit hallway after them, taking note of the dirt-smeared soda machine on one end of the hall, the ruffled propaganda posters sporting some logo and insignia he didn't recognize, and the dimly flickering lights on the ceiling.

The hallway led to a large room filled with tables and chairs and benches. Several blue-uniformed citizens sat scattered around the room, heads in their hands. As Gordon walked by the first table, he felt a cold gnarled hand grab his sleeve.

Looking down in alarm, he saw it was an old man. His eyes were rolling in his head; he looked wild. However, when he spoke, his voice was quite lucid. "Don't drink the water," he said quietly. "They put something in it toâ€¦ to make you forget. I don't even remember how I got here." The man released his arm and Gordon, frightened and confused, moved on.

"I see they took your suitcase too," another citizen said to him as he passed. "They can't get away with this much longer!" Gordon looked ahead and saw a large winding fenced area, almost like the red velvet ropes that led in a winding path to movie desks, where he bought tickets as a young boy. At the entrance to the fenced path, the two men from his train car stood, talking quietly. Above them, another monitor with Breen's face on it repeated its "Welcome to City 17" message.

"I was hoping we'd seen the last of him in City 14," one of them said. "I wouldn't say that too loud," the other replied in an undertone. "This is his base of operations." Gordon stepped up behind them. "What're they doing?" he asked, pointing through the fence, where a group of officers were shoving several citizens through a gate. "They're processing them," the black guy said quietly. "Some of them are sent to the plaza and reassigned to different camps. Others are sent to Nova Prospekt. I have no idea what goes on there, but no one ever comes back."

"I'm going on through," Gordon said firmly. He looked through the gates. "Listen, what are your names? I might see you or need to find you later."

The black guy smiled, but there was no happiness there. "My name's Leon, and this is Chris. But you won't need our names. I doubt we will ever see you again."

A deep chill settled in his bones, but he ignored it. "I'm Gordon Freeman," he said. With that, he walked away.

Gordon strolled through the winding fence and was soon standing before a group of the metro police. They were currently harassing another haggard looking citizen. "You, citizen, come with me," an officer said.

"Wait a minute, where are you â€œ" the citizen stared, but the officer jabbed him with a stun baton. The man let out a pained cry, slumping against the fence. The smell of burned flesh reached Gordon's nostrils.

"Get in here! Go on!" the officer snarled, holding open a door between two fences. Gordon couldn't see what was beyond it. "But—" the man whispered, sounding terrified. "I said _move_!" the officer snarled, shoving him through the door and slamming it shut behind him. Gordon watched, heart pounding, as another officer beckoned him forward.

"Citizen, step between the two fences," the officer ordered, and Gordon complied. Another scanner floated above him, taking his picture yet again. Gordon blinked against the flash.

"Ah, yes," the officer said. "Through that gate, citizen." Gordon looked at the sign next to the gate and suddenly felt a wave of unexplainable dread pass through him. The sign read: _Nova Prospekt._

Gordon was about to make a break for it when suddenly the door the other citizen had been shunted through was opened. Another officer stood there, pointing at him. "You, citizen! Come with me." Behind him was a dingy hallway.

Gordon followed him. He was somewhat reluctant about going into this dark hallway when he didn't know what lay ahead, but he somehow doubted he wanted to go to Nova Prospekt, either. As he followed the officer down the hall, he passed several locked doors, each with a viewing slot. Most were closed, but one was open. Gordon looked through it as he passed. He saw a man sitting, tied to a chair, and below him on the floor were dark red stains —

Shit, is that blood?

"This is a mistake," the man in the chair was saying. "I've got a standard relocation coupon, just like everybody else." As Gordon watched, an officer walked up the viewing slot and closed it with an ominous click.

"Through here," the officer ahead of him said, stopping at the last door in the hall. He raised his gloved fist and knocked loudly several times.

The door opened, and another officer stepped out. "Need any help with this one?" he asked. "No, I'm good," the one leading Gordon replied, and the other officer exited the room and left down the hallway.

"Get in," the officer said sharply, shoving him into the room. Gordon saw an identical chair with restraints in the centre of a room, along with a large console with many screens at one end of the room. "Back up," the officer said, moving towards the console. Gordon noticed two cameras on retractable black poles, each armed with a small turret. Feeling a stab of apprehension, Gordon looked at the now locked door. There was no way out.

"I'm gonna need me some privacy for this," the guard muttered, tapping keys on the console. The cameras suddenly retracted into the ceiling. "Now," he said, turning to Gordon, and he tensed himself at last to fight. He was sore and tired, but he would not be taken in and tortured by this officer. But before he could throw a punch, the officer pulled off his helmet. "About that beer I owed ya."

"Barney!" Gordon exclaimed, overjoyed. The messy brown haired security guard he had known in Black Mesa grinned at him, looking infinitely older and more tired, but still seemed to be the same guy. When he had last seen Barney, both of them had been fighting against an onslaught of alien Xen creatures while Dr. Kleiner prepared a teleportation device Gordon had used to get to Xen. He was elated that Barney had managed to survive and escape.

"Sorry about the scare, but I had to put on a show for the cameras," Barney said, jerking his thumb toward the now stationary ceiling mounted devices. "I've been working undercover with Civil Protection," Barney continued. Civil Protection, Gordon gathered, was the system of officers and metro police that had been abusing the citizens. "I can't take too long or they'll get suspicious, I'm already way behind on my beating quota."

"What's going on here, Barney?" Gordon asked, feeling the rush of questions build up and flow out of him. "What happened after Black Mesa? How long has Civil Protection been abusing the citizens? What is Dr. Breen doing in the city? And what happened to all the others?"

Barney held up his hands. "I wish I had the time to answer, Gordon, but I've only got a minute." He began typing rapidly into the console. "We'll get you to safety first and then deal with questions." The monitor on the console flickered and suddenly a balding, white haired man with spectacles came onto the screen.

"Yes, Barney, what is it? I'm in the middle of a critical test."

"Sorry Doc, but look who's here!" Barney said, moving aside. Gordon looked up at the screen. "Dr. Kleiner!" he cried happily. Another one of his friends had survived Black Mesa!

"Great Scott! Gordon Freeman!" Dr. Kleiner exclaimed. "I expected more warning."

"Yeah, you and me both, Doc," Barney replied. "He was about to board the express to Nova Prospekt!" Both men twitched involuntarily. "What's â€" Gordon started, but Barney silenced him with a wave of his hand. "We don't have long, Doc."

"Well, what do you intend to do, Barney?" Dr. Kleiner asked. The former security guard shrugged. "I'm thinking, I'm thinking."

"Alyx is around hereâ€¦ somewhere," Dr. Kleiner said thoughtfully. "She would have a better idea of how to get him here."

"Alyx? Alyx Vance?" Gordon asked, surprised. He had last seen Eli Vance's little girl when she was only just a baby, in Black Mesa. "So Eli and Alyx are okay?"

"Yes, they're both fine," Dr. Kleiner nodded. "Eli's wife Azian died in the aftermath of the resonance cascade, but they made it out alive."

"As long as he stays away from checkpoints, we should be okay,"

Barney said, glancing at Gordon. "Listen, Doc, we've gotta go. We're taking enough chances as it is."

"Very well," Dr. Kleiner said. "Good luck. And eh, Gordon? Good to see you."

"Likewise, believe me," Gordon said as the screen turned black. "Okay, Gordon, you'll have to make your own way to Dr. Kleiner's lab." Before he could say anything else, a loud pounding came from the door. "Damn it, that's what I was afraid of!" Barney said. He rushed over to a back door at the end of the room. "Through here, Gordon, before you blow my cover!"

Gordon scampered into the dark room, and found that it was a storage area, filled with tons of wooden boxes. "Here, pile some stuff up and get out through the window, then keep going until you're in the plaza," Barney said hurriedly, wincing as the pounding on the door grew more insistent. "I'll meet up with you later." He shut the door before Gordon could respond.

Not wasting any time, Gordon looked up and saw a tiny rectangle of light near the top of the room. Low voices sounded from the other side of the door. Gordon quickly grabbed a box, grunting softly at the weight, before stacking it beneath the window. He scrambled onto it and shoved himself through the small space, cursing. He could barely fit. He heard the door below him open the sound of a mechanical voice, just as he fell through the window.

"Ugh!"

He grunted loudly as he crashed into the ground below. His legs aching, Gordon staggered to his feet and looked around wildly for a quick escape route. He was in a small enclosed alleyway, and the only door around was a small, half open one leading to a dimly lit hall. Not stopping to consider what lay beyond it, Gordon ran through and up the stairs beyond it, coming out in a large hallway.

The hallway ended shortly and Gordon saw a small cafeteria through the open doorway. It was nearly empty. Only three people were lining up at the far side of the room, and a Civil Protection officer was striding towards him from the side. His weapons were holstered, but he was still intimidating.

As Gordon tried to go through the door, the officer blocked him, pushing him back roughly. Gordon opened his mouth to retort, when the cop reached out with one hand and knocked an empty soda can off the edge of a trash can. "You, citizen, pick up that can," he ordered. Gordon felt like telling him to fuck off and pick it up himself, but his joints were still aching, and he didn't fancy being knocked around by the cop's stun stick. As if sensing his resistance, the officer put a threatening hand on the handle of the baton, staring at him through the white mask and goggles. Feeling defeated, Gordon leaned over and picked up the can.

"Good," the Civil Protection officer said, barely concealed laughter in his voice. "Now, put it in the trash can." Gordon complied, feeling like the man's bitch. The feeling was evidently mutual, as the man let out a soft chuckle. "All right, you can go," he said, walking away and chortling to himself. Gordon glared at him as he disappeared, and walked towards the people in the line.

"The line starts at the end," a young woman told him roughly, pushing him aside as he walked up. She went up to a slot in a window, and a strange mechanical device with two arms deposited a package of rations in her hands. She then walked away.

Gordon's stomach rumbled and he realized he was hungry. How long had it been since he had eaten? He stood behind as two more citizens got their food, and then went up to the window. The ration dispenser dropped the package in his hands, and Gordon tore it open and once and began to wolf down the rations. Almost immediately, he gagged. It was in the form of a dried grey mush that tasted like cardboard. It smelled like cardboard too. _You've gotta be damn hungry to wait in line for this crap,_ Gordon thought. Steeling himself, he finished the rations, his stomach clenching as he swallowed. When he was done, he tossed the empty package in the trash, and exited through the only other door in the room.

It led outside, Gordon soon saw, when he found himself in the large plaza Barney had spoken of. Citizens milled here and there, slumped unmoving on benches or leaning against lampposts. Others shuffled down the city streets, walking towards strange black pylon things that had a humming blue force field set up in between them. Some citizens could pass through it, he noticed, but others could not. When this happened the force field would emit a loud drone and flash red briefly. There was a larger one further down the street, Gordon saw, and as he watched a huge armoured car drove through it. So inanimate objects weren't affected, it seemed.

And everywhere there were Civil Protection cops. They were stationed around the plaza, some in guard towers over the force fieldsâ€¦ everywhere he looked he could see the black-green uniforms and white face masks. Hobbling down the street, Gordon walked up to a man who was headed to one of the force fields.

"Hey, listen, could you â€œ"

"I can't be seen talking to you," the man said bluntly, ignoring Gordon and proceeding through the blue field. "Not out here."

Then he was gone. Gordon tried to follow him through the force field, but it turned red and wouldn't let him through. As the force field hummed, a CP looked over at him, his hand on his stun baton. Hastily Gordon retreated, walking away quickly down a side street littered with small bits of trash and dead leaves.

Up ahead there was a huge heavy black gate, as well as another of the huge armoured cars he had seen earlier. A flock of Civil Protection officers had congealed around it. Lying on the ground were â€œ Gordon's stomach twisted in rage and disgust â€œ the bodies of three male civilians, lying in a pool of spreading blood with a gunshot wound to the head. Three female citizens were pressed against the wall, hands behind their head.

"Hey, you!" one of the officers suddenly shouted, brandishing his stun baton. "Get back here!" Darting into a side alley, Gordon dodged out of their sight and continued through the alley, past an abandoned playground. The monkey bars and jungle gym were all coated with rust and discolouration. The merry-go-round was turning squeakily in the wind. Up ahead, two CPs were blocking the entrance to a building. Two

citizens were crouched in the shadows of a nearby building. Gordon bent over and scurried over to them.

"This is how it always happens," one of them was muttering in an undertone. "First one building, then the whole block."

"They have no reason to come to our place," the other replied. The first citizen snorted derisively. "Don't worry, they'll find one."

"You new here?" the second citizen inquired of Gordon. He nodded. Remembering what he had been told at the train station, he added, "I just got transferred." This seemed like the correct thing to do, as both citizens nodded satisfactorily. "Yeah, Ed here arrived last week. I've been here for about a month. I'm one of the lucky ones. Haven't been sent to a workcamp or one of the Combine's mining programs yet."

"Mining programs?"

Suddenly a group of Civil Protection officers came around the corner. "We'd better continue this upstairs," the citizen called Ed said tersely, grabbing Gordon by the arm and pulling him into the apartment. They climbed about three flights of dingy stairs and emerged on a long carpeted hallway. The door to the first apartment on the hall was open, and a brown-haired woman was peeking out. At the end of the hall another group of metro cops were breaking down the door to another apartment. Startled cries and screams came from the invaded apartment, followed quickly by gunshots.

"Leslie, move it, we found another one," Ed said, ushering Gordon forward. The woman at the door nodded and shrank back, allowing Gordon into the apartment. It was nearly devoid of furniture apart from two couches and a couple chairs. A large wooden board propped up on two stools served as a table. The cabinets on the walls were dirty and their paint was peeling. There were several other citizens in the apartment, two looking out the window at the street, and another two huddled in a corner, whispering to each other. There was one other room to the apartment, but it was boarded up with plywood.

Gordon stepped up behind the couple at the window. The man started, looking at him. "Oh! I thought you were a cop."

"No, he's one of us," the woman said, resuming peering out the window. Gordon looked down. "Look at them down there," the man continued, scratching a smear of dirt on the window. Down below on the street, an armoured car had swerved up against the curb, and a group of officers was pouring out, batons and pistols in their hands. "Shit, are they coming for us?" Gordon asked urgently. Before the others could reply, the sound of pounding feet on the stairs reached their ears.

"Warning," a disembodied female voice came from a speaker out in the hall. "Attention residents. Miscount detected in your sector."

"Shit! CPs!" Ed yelled from the door. "Everyone out, head to the roof! Now! No time to lose!"

"What's going â€" Gordon started to ask, but the citizens around him

were in a sudden panic. They burst out into the hallway, calling out to the other residents. "Civil Protection! Run for your life! Here they come!"

Other residents joined the flow of citizens stampeding for the stairs at the other end of the hall. Gordon chanced a glance back, and felt another stab of fear. The CPs had reached their floor and were coming down the hall after them, pistols blazing. The gunshots sounded deafening in the hall. A man next to Gordon suddenly fell in a spurt of scarlet, screaming loudly. Others were jabbed mercilessly with the electric stun batons.

Gordon was the first to reach the stairwell. Just as he hurtled through, he saw another group of CPs heading up the stairs below him. "Shit!" he cried, seeing that the citizens would be cut off. He hovered there anxiously, unsure of whether to run or try to help them. Before he could decide, the CPs had blocked the exit, firing and stabbing into the confused and terrified mass of citizens. Blood splattered on the walls as bodies slumped to the floor.

"No!" Gordon cried before he could stop himself. One of the Civil Protection officers looked up, light flashing off his goggles. "One got away! Up there!" he snarled, pointing, and the officers began running up the stairs towards him. Gordon turned tail and ran, feet pounding heavily on the stairs, until he had reached the top floor. Angry shouts and the rapidly pounding feet followed close behind.

As Gordon emerged into the top floor hallway, he saw a dark skinned head looking out of a crack in one of the doors. He wrenched the door open. "Get in here, quick!" the man yelled. Gordon ran as fast as he could and skidded to a stop outside the door, darting inside. The man barely had time to slam it shut before the CPs rammed into it. The man braced himself against the door. "Go on, head to the roof! I'll keep them busy!" he cried.

Gordon hesitated. _He's staying to help me. I should have done that with the other citizens._ "But â€"

"No! Just _go_!" the man yelled, and the door buckled inwards. Gordon sprinted through the apartment towards a stairwell near the back, just as the door burst open.

He looked back and was just in time to see a Civil Protection officer raise his pistol and fire it, right into the man's forehead. The top of his head exploded, sending a spray of blood and bone and brain fragments into the wall. His decimated, near-headless body slumped to the floor in a pool of gore. The CP that had shot him pointed at Gordon, his mask now covered with a brilliant streak of blood. Flecks of it were on his left eye goggle.

"Get him!"

Feeling sick, Gordon ran up the stairs, and found himself in a large attic. Looking around wildly, he saw a nearby wooden box and kicked it down the stairs; he heard a strangled cry as one of the officers fell heavily. Grabbing a dusty 2Ã—4 from the ground, Gordon sprinted towards a huge open gap in one of the windows, where fragments of glass still remained in it like broken knives. Gordon leaped through the gap and found himself on a nearby apartment rooftop. He looked around and suddenly a loud gunshot pierced the air. Ducking, Gordon

looked backward, noticing four metro cops standing in the attic, firing at him. Putting on a burst of speed, Gordon ran across the rooftop, noticing two long wooden planks leading to the next one.

Chips of stone flew up at his feet as bullets impacted near him. Dashing across the boards, not stopping to acknowledge their dangerous wobbling, he made it to the next roof. Turning quickly, Gordon kicked the boards with his foot, sending them falling down to the city street below and ensuring that Civil Protection couldn't follow him.

He turned and noticed a long rafter which looked as though it would support his weight. Several rooftops away, he could see an open window. Gordon gingerly stepped onto the rafter, slowly edging across to the next roof. A loud roar disturbed his progress and he looked down, seeing an armoured car barrel down the street and screech to a halt outside his building. Two CPs jumped out of the vehicle and raised their handguns. Suddenly the window next to his head exploded.

Yelling in fright, Gordon dashed across the rafter and ran across the rooftops. Bullets whined past his head, uncomfortably close. Soon he had reached the open window, luckily without being shot. Clambering in, Gordon found himself in a similar attic. He found the stairs leading down and quickly descended, but as he was going down they caved in under his feet. Collapsing to the wooden floor with a loud grunt and the sound of falling wood, Gordon pushed himself up and staggered out into a hallway.

He headed for the door at the end of the hall when suddenly it burst inward, revealing several Civil Protection officers. "There he is!" one of them cried. Whirling around, Gordon started to go the other way, when another group of metro cops came around the corner. He was surrounded.

With no other alternative, Gordon turned back and, ignoring his stiff arms, swung the 2A-4 as hard as he could at the first officer's head. One of the man's goggles shattered and he dropped to the floor, groaning loudly. Gordon whirled around and rammed another officer in the face, but before he could turn and attack another, something small and sharp dug into the small of his back.

Sharp, blinding pain ripped through him as thousands of volts of electric current met his body. His body locked in a spasm, his vision filled with white light, Gordon collapsed, feeling two rough hands grab his shoulders. Dimly, he could hear a distant female voice, and suddenly the arms clutching him were gone.

"Hey, you. Hey, wake up."

Gordon slowly opened his eyes and as his vision slowly came back into focus, a young woman's face swam into view before him. The woman smiled, showing white, even teeth, and her black hair fell around her face as she leaned over him. "Doctor Freeman, I presume?" she said with a grin. "You'd better hurry and come with me. The Combine can be slow to wake, but once you do, you don't want to get in their way."

His body filled with a new aching and throbbing pain, Gordon got to

his feet, studying the girl fully for the first time. She was much younger than him. She wasn't dressed in the typical blue clothing he had seen thus far. Instead, she wore tight-fitting jeans, covered by a loose utility belt. She was also wearing a grey hooded sweatshirt with the Black Mesa Research Facility logo, and a brown vest overtop. Bright hazel eyes looked out at him from her face.

"Dr. Kleiner said you might be coming this way," the girl continued. "I don't think it occurred to him that you might not have a map."

"You know Dr. Kleiner?" Gordon asked, feeling distinctly confused. "Who are you?"

The girl smiled. "I'm Alyx Vance. Nice to finally meet you."

A/N: So what do you think? The next chapter will follow Adrian Shephard. Please read and review, reviews keep me going. Thank you!

3. Outright Opposition

It was around seven when she called him in for dinner. The sun was beginning its descent across the horizon, merging in a bloody red and gold line with the green fields that stretched out before him. Often he and Marty, his faithful beagle, would go frolicking through the tall stalks of grass. He would throw a ball to distract Marty and then hide among the grass, turning invisible within the thick green mass, timing how long it would take the bounding beagle to find him. More often than not, Glen would join him, playing hide-and-seek with him in the long grass and having fake matches of capture the flag or water gun fights. Today, Glen was busy with chores in the house, and it was just him and Marty.

"_Adrian! Dinner! I'm not going to tell you again!" his mother's cross voice drifted across the field. She would, though, he knew he had at least one 'last time' call before she got really mad. Nevertheless, Adrian sighed, popping out of the grass and darting across the field. "C'mon, Marty, let's go!"_

The beagle gamboled joyfully around his heels as the boy set off through the hills, down the slope towards home.

The screen door at the side of the house was open slightly, swinging in the soft breeze that played with the grass in the fields. The entire house was painted gold in the sunset. Through the top floor window, he could see Glen's hanging posters of the solar system and his models of airplanes and space shuttles dominating the air. He hurried in.

"_Shoes off, Adrian, don't track mud in here," his mother admonished, sweeping past him with a broom. He mumbled an apology as Marty scrambled in from behind him, bounding straight to his water dish and lapping noisily. Glen was already seated at the table, which was set with cutlery and plates. A steaming roast chicken sat on a plate in the centre of the table._

"_Don't forget to wash your hands," his mother said, and Adrian rolled his eyes slightly before moving to the sink and turning the

tap on. When his hands were thoroughly clean he sat at the end of the table, next to Glen, and clasped his hands together. The seat between Glen and his mother was quite empty._

x x x x

Adrian opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was a dark grey sky overhead, a thick mass of clouds that stretched as far as he could see. His eyes drank in the overcast, gorging themselves upon its miraculous beauty. Adrian never thought he would experience such fierce joy from simply seeing the sky.

He was lying flat on his back on a cold, hard surface that dug into his shoulders. Slowly he forced himself into a sitting position, hissing with pain as his stiff limbs complied with his body's movements. Being in stasis for so long " _how long? _he thought again " had taken its toll on his system.

He tentatively touched his face, still astonished at being back. Coarse stubble on his cheeks and chin met his hesitantly probing fingers. A faint breeze floated past him, ruffling his short dark hair. A low rumble of thunder echoed across the sky. Adrian staggered to his feet, struggling to get his bearings. His body was still sluggish and weak from his containment. He looked around, trying to figure out where he was.

He seemed to be in an abandoned parking lot. A rusted car was parked several feet away, its hood popped open like a hungry mouth. Inside its engines and parts were coated with iron rust, and had fallen into disrepair. Glancing around, Adrian saw that he appeared to be in some sort of city. Eastern European, by the look of the architecture. Taking his first shaking, uncertain steps forward, Adrian stumbled out of the lot like a drunk and slowly headed up the street.

The city seemed deserted at first glance, but after walking for several minutes Adrian became aware of signs of life. A massive black tower reared before him in the distance, seemingly exploding upward from the heart of the grim metropolis. Small mechanical devices floated around and about the tower, some floating over the city streets like small black sentinels.

The roar of distant engines suggested that some cars of transport vehicles were at work. He could hear the low throb of machinery throughout the city, as well as loud klaxon like wailings every now and then. Confused, overwhelmed by his new surroundings, Adrian staggered on.

As he walked, Adrian became aware of noises up ahead. The loud drone of an engine grew louder in the street. It sounded as though some type of heavy vehicle was making its way toward him. Ducking into the shadowed area behind a dark green dumpster, Adrian observed the street from an alley as the vehicle grew closer. He had no idea what it was, or whether it was friendly or not, but he wasn't going to take chances until he could figure out where he was.

As Adrian looked on, a huge armoured van barreled down the street. It was a faded metallic blue-grey colour, with thick black striped tires that didn't resemble anything Adrian had ever seen before. A large turret gun was mounted on the top, near a clear class dome-like window. The (by Adrian's guess) armoured personnel carrier rumbled

away, leaving deep black tread marks on the asphalt.

Before he had time to ponder the strangeness of the APC's appearance, a group of people hurried past. Adrian almost let out a cry of joy, for they were the first people he had laid eyes on in who knew how long, but something held him back. Maybe he was crazy, but he had a distinctive gut feeling that there was something off about them. He had learned to trust his intuition, and right now his entire being was screaming that the group in front of him was bad news. He took in their authoritative stride, their gleaming white face masks, their highly polished boots and their drawn handguns and batons. _What are they?_ Adrian wondered. _Police or something? A gang?_ But before he could ponder further, the group of strangely garbed individuals had vanished around a corner.

Adrian waited for several more minutes before exiting the relative cover of his alley, just in case. He warily crouched next to the building, surveying the street for other signs of life. As he watched, a dark black shape drifted down from the leaden sky and swooped over his head; ducking, Adrian cursed as it emitted a blinding flash, scorching his eyes. He blinked furiously, trying to clear his vision, but by the time he had, the thing was nowhere to be seen.

Before he could contemplate on what the small black thing was, he felt something. A splash of water, on his arm. He looked down and saw a tiny grouping of water droplets on his muscled forearm. The dampness of the droplets soaked into his skin.

As Adrian stood there, another droplet found his face, then another. Thunder snarled overhead, there was a flash of blue lightning, and in the next second, rain was pouring from the sky in torrents, soaking his clothes and his skin and his face and the ground around him. Adrian fell to his knees, overcome, in the middle of the street, laughing and crying at the same time as the raindrops caressed his skin. The water felt like heaven as it pounded onto his face and body. After years of being completely devoid of sensation, the mere touch of rain was overwhelming. The tears in his eyes mixing with the water, Adrian sat, on his knees in the middle of the street, as the rain poured down around him.

x x x x

Jill was exhausted.

She had been skulking around the ruins of the abandoned apartment buildings for three hours, looking for the case. The latest message she had received had told her to look for it in Block 22-B, but the message was vague and contained no further hints. She suspected the apartment had been raided by the Combine before her contact could send her the exact coordinates of the case's location. So she had been forced to rummage through the city block for the better part of three hours, combing through the disused residential buildings, looking diligently for the green writing case.

Jill knew she was putting her entire residential sector at risk because of her absence, but nowadays risk was a constant factor in her, and everybody's, life. She couldn't do her job without a great deal of risk, because there was no security as a Resistance member. All she could do was pray her absence would go unnoticed for another

couple hours, at least until she returned to her sector.

Jill walked up the curving staircase of the final apartment on the block, her footsteps echoing in the emptiness. The ravaged building had fallen into disrepair. Paint was peeling off the walls, clothes and household items dotted the floors in the hallways and in the apartments, hastily left behind when the citizens had been herded away by the Combine. Boxes of citizens' possessions were grouped together in a messy pile at the foot of the staircase, forgotten and collecting dust in the quiet, empty building.

It broke her heart to see the city fall apart like this. Every time she looked into an empty bedroom and saw a dust-stricken teddy bear in a corner on the floor, or a torn picture of a laughing couple, she felt tears burn at her eyes and sadness threaten to consume her. The Combine had destroyed everything. But she could do nothing for those who had been lost. All she could do was strive to help everyone that could still be saved, and that wouldn't be accomplished by continually breaking down.

Jill stepped into the open doorway of Apartment 20, eyes sweeping the living room. It was scant and devoid of much furniture. All that was left was a beige loveseat, a reclining armchair, a coffee table, and a television set in a small wooden cabinet. Jill stepped across the worn carpet, leaving a distinctive footprint in the half inch of thick dust that coated the floor. She crossed over to the couch and began stripping it of cushions, searching for the case. She turned the living room upside down, even cutting the pillows open with her makeshift shiv and searching through the stuffing. When she found nothing, she moved on.

Ten minutes later, Jill finally found the green leather writing case, hidden under the sink cabinet in the bathroom of the house. Breathing a sigh of relief, she dropped to her knees and flicked the case open, quickly scanning the contents. Good. It was all there. Snapping the case shut again, Jill got to her feet and went to the sink, turning one of the taps on. It squeaked with rust and for a minute, nothing happened, until with an explosive snort filthy grey water burst out of the tap. Jill let it run for a minute, until it turned clear, before washing her hands and face. She looked up into the mirror, gazing at her reflection, her exhaustion seeping through her body now more than ever. Her face was pale and drawn, and there were slight lines at the corners of her eyes, despite her young age. Her auburn hair was untidy and disheveled, falling around her shoulders. The only bright and vibrant part of her appearance was her eyes, two emerald coloured spheres still vivid with life.

As Jill reached out and turned off the tap, she heard a scuffling noise in the distance. She froze, ears pricked, and sure enough, the telltale noise of rapidly pounding feet followed. The Combine were raiding the apartment block.

Cursing quietly, Jill snatched the leather case's handle tightly in her left hand, her heart pounding wildly. If the Combine discovered the case, it would mean the end of the Resistance. Jill looked at the hallway outside the bathroom. She couldn't escape the way she had come in — no time. The Combine could catch her on the way out. Turning around, she quickly pushed at the window over the radiator in the corner of the bathroom. After a few shoves, the window swung outward.

The sound of footsteps was growing louder. Jill hoisted herself up into the tiny opening, squirming to fit through the little space. She slithered out of the window and fell noisily onto the steel grating of the fire escape. Wasting no time, Jill got to her feet and hastily made her way down the connecting metal stairwell, praying the Combine hadn't heard her noisy fall. All the while she was uncomfortably aware of the case in her hand.

Jill finally reached the bottom of the fire escape. Not wasting time with the ladder, she simply swung herself over the metal railing and jumped the rest of the way down. She landed heavily on both feet, groaning loudly as the shock vibrated through her legs. She felt something twist in her ankle and she bit back a gasp of pain; however, she had no time to waste, so she hobbled away from the building and around a corner just as a masked face poked its head out from the window she had just vacated from.

Jill limped away from the building, her heartbeat slowly returning to normal. Her right ankle was throbbing painfully, and it hurt to put weight on it, but she would deal with that until she got back to her sector. Ducking into an abandoned lot to avoid a squadron of Civil Protection officers, Jill noticed the sky darkening.

Probably going to rain again, she thought, and sure enough, next second it was pouring down in sheets, drenching her clothes and plastering her hair to her scalp. Jill hurried onward through the rain, wanting nothing more than to return to the relative safety of her apartment, where hopefully Adam had managed to procure some hot coffee "â€"

"â€" and she stopped in her tracks as she saw a figure crouched up ahead in the middle of the street. It was little more than a black shadow, blurred by the rain, features obscured. Its face was tilted up towards the rain.

Jill had half a mind to skirt the figure and go back the other way, but something made her stop. The figure definitely wasn't a Civil Protection officer, because he or she wasn't wearing a mask. It also didn't look to be a citizen, because its clothes didn't look the same as hers. Frowning, Jill stepped forward, her footsteps muffled by the rain, and approached the figure from behind.

"Who are you?"

x x x x

The voice sounded from behind him. Adrian whirled around, caught off guard. Before him stood a woman, staring at him with a slight frown tugging at her mouth. Her light blue clothes were plastered to her body, along with her hair, which was a vivid auburn colour. Her eyes were bright green and shaped like almonds. Her skin was pale and creamy, seeming to shine in the silver sheets of rain.

Wow, Adrian thought. _Who is she? She's beautiful._

"Uh," he said, and immediately felt foolish. The fact was, he was overcome by her appearance. She was here, a real human being "â€" one that didn't seem (he hoped) threatening. He hadn't heard another voice for such a long time. The soft notes of her speech shone and

fell upon his ears like beautiful music.

"What? It's not hard, just spit it out," the woman said, raising an eyebrow at him, her face still locked in a distrustful frown. She crossed her arms over her chest, water dripping in rivulets from her clothes. In her left hand she clutched a battered green leather case. "Who are you?"

Adrian stared at her. Should he tell the truth? He had no idea who this woman was, and although she didn't seem like a threat, past experiences had taught him that first impressions could be misleading. He looked at her, and she stared back, nonplussed. Finally, he decided that he needed information about where he was and what was going on, and she could be the one to give it to him. It wouldn't hurt to tell her his name.

"I'm Adrian," he said, his voice sounding unsure, unused. "Adrian Shephard."

The woman looked at him in silence for several moments. She opened her mouth to speak, when a loud alarm sounded in the distance. "We'll have to talk later," she said. "I don't have time for this; I have to get back to my sector before they detect the miscount. The Combine don't mess around."

What the hell is she talking about? Adrian wondered. _What sector? What is the Combine?_ "Wait!" he called, as the woman turned to leave. She looked back over her shoulder impatiently. "Who are you? Where are we? And what exactly is the Combine?"

"Are you serious?" the woman asked, her voice halfway between utter skepticism and confusion. "How can you not even knowâ€¦ oh, forget it," she said frantically, as the unmistakable rumble of another APC drifted closer to their position. "No time for that, we've got to go before they find us! Hurry, if you're coming with me, than move it!"

Sensing the incoming danger, Adrian complied and followed the woman without hesitation. She led him through a dark alley and out onto another street. He could hear shouts in the distance, and the woman stopped. "Quick, in that alley!" she whispered, grabbing his hand and tugging him into the shadowy alcove. Moments later, another squad of the white-masked men ran past, toting pistols.

"I don't get it," Adrian whispered, eyes on the men as they disappeared. "Who are they? And what are they doing here?"

"I was about to ask you the same question," a cold, mechanical voice issued from behind them. Adrian spun around in surprise, and found three of the masked men striding out of the shadows, their eye goggles shining in the rain. Their white masks were pale and forbidding in the half-light.

Beside him, the woman muttered, "shit."

"So, looks like a couple of rats have strayed too far from the sewer," the first masked man spoke again, and it was followed by cruel laughter from the other two. The laughter was fragmented and sounded garbled, as though it was being transmitted through some sort of mechanical device. The sound chilled Adrian's bones.

"What about this one?" the second masked man said, poking him roughly in the shoulder with the handle of his baton. Adrian fought the urge to knock it away. Two of the men were armed with batons, whereas the first had a small pistol clutched in his right gloved hand. As long as the first man had the pistol, he couldn't risk attacking them. "He's not dressed like a civilian."

Adrian blinked and looked down, hardly able to believe that until now he hadn't even spared his clothes a glance. Instead of his customary Powered Combat Vest, he noted with surprise, he was garbed in black combat pants and a loose black checkered combat shirt.

"Who cares how he's dressed?" the one with the pistol said. "In two minutes it's not gonna matter, because nobody's gonna see his sorry ass ever again."

Adrian glared at the man. Next to him, the woman was looking frightened and frantic. Her fingers were clutching the leather case so tightly they had turned white.

"You, citizen," the pistol man ordered. "Up against the wall. Now."

"I don't take orders from you," Adrian snapped. His limbs and body had finally grown less stiff, and didn't feel ripe with aching pain any longer. He felt no fear, only a heightened sense of wariness. He waited as the man took a step forward.

"What did you just say?" he whispered in that dead, mechanical voice. Adrian's lip curled. "I said I don't take orders from filth. Now why don't you just get the hell out of my face before I decide to stop being nice?" The woman seemed to flinch at this; her eyes darted nervously back and forth between him and the masked men.

"You filthy scum," the man snarled. "I'll make you eat those words. Take em' out," he said coldly, and with a sharp buzzing noise, the ends of the other officers' batons suddenly lit up with a blue electric current. One of them stepped forward and grabbed Adrian's shoulder.

In a quick, fluid movement, Adrian grabbed the man's arm and twisted it, and the man grunted in pain. Adrian quickly drove a fist into the man's side, causing him to double over, before grabbing the man's throat and forcefully hurling him to the rain-soaked ground. His limbs shook with the effort, and Adrian realized he was definitely not fully healed from his long period in stasis. However, even as beads of sweat formed on his forehead, he lashed out immediately after the masked man fell, not waiting for them to regain their wits.

Adrian seized the second man's wrist and twisted it ruthlessly, snapping the man's bone and eliciting a sharp howl from him. The stun baton fell from his grasp, and Adrian deftly caught it in midair and drove it into the man's side. A sharp crackling filled the air as the man screamed again. Smoke rose in thick streams from the ribcage of his vest, along with the putrid scent of burning flesh. The first officer raised his pistol and aimed it at him, but Adrian was ready. He quickly maneuvered the stunned man before him and held him like a human shield; seconds later, the bullets ripped into the man and he

let out a choked cry before going limp in Adrian's arms.

The first man snarled and strode forward, aiming the gun again, and Adrian shoved the limp carcass he was holding forward as hard as he could. The two bodies collided and fell to the ground. Adrian strode forward and kicked the gun into the shadows as he seized the man on the ground, hauling him to his feet and throwing him roughly at the wall. The man slammed into it head first, dropping like a stone at his feet. Adrian turned, breathing fast, towards the woman who, all this time, had stood with a bewildered and astonished look on her porcelain features.

"Are youâ€" Adrian started, when a booted foot knocked sideways into his foot and sent him staggering sideways. Adrian looked down; one of the officers had stumbled to his feet, his left goggle lens cracked. A stun baton was crackling in his hand as he lunged.

Adrian sidestepped, but the man wasn't going for him. He instead grabbed the woman, ignoring her scream and bringing the baton close to her throat. Adrian took a step forward, but the man pressed the baton less than an inch from her throat, the vibrating blue tip sinister in the dark.

"I've upped the charge to a lethal dose," the man snarled. "One touch of this and it's lights out, permanently. Don't move or she gets it."

Adrian stopped moving. The woman stood, eyes wide with fear. The man's arms were wrapped around her throat and waist. "Drop the baton," the man continued, and Adrian quickly did so. "Good move," the man said in his mechanical voice. "And just as it happens, your last." He looked over his shoulder for a split second, searching for reinforcements.

In that exact moment, the woman's arm suddenly jerked backwards, ramming something into the man's left thigh. The man shrieked in pain, stumbling backwards and grasping at his leg, where the handle of a blade jutted out.

The momentary distraction was all Adrian needed. He lurched toward the man, kicking the baton on the ground at him. The man reached up to protect his face, and Adrian aimed at his stomach, punching him once, twice, three times. The man staggered, dazed, and Adrian seized his opportunity. He grabbed the man's head in both arms, and with a swift, brutal twist, snapped his neck.

The body fell with a thud at his feet, the bloody mask half submerged in a puddle of water. Adrian turned away from it, looking back to the woman, who was gaping at him in open-mouthed shock. "You killed him," she whispered, green eyes fearful and astonished. "You saved me."

"We've got to go," Adrian said hurriedly. "Someone will have heard all that. Is there anywhere we can hide?"

"The subway tunnels," the woman said, shaking her head to clear it. "Then lead the way," Adrian said, and the woman nodded quickly before heading off.

She led him through the empty street, where at the end Adrian could

see more masked men heading their way. After ducking through another alley, the woman led him down a flight of stairs into a darkened subway platform. He noticed she was limping slightly, and that her right leg trembled every time she put pressure on it.

Adrian was about to ask if she was all right, when she beckoned to him with her hand. "There's a small maintenance room branching off from the right of this subway tunnel. We can wait there until the patrols overhead pass, and then continue until we get back to my residential sector."

Adrian's head was spinning, but he nodded and hurried to catch up to the woman near the end of the platform. He jumped down onto the tracks, holding his arms out. The woman hesitated briefly before accepting his offer, and he grabbed her waist and lifted her down onto the tracks. "Thanks," she murmured, turning and heading down the tunnel. Adrian followed.

After a minute, they came to the small room she had referred to. It was blocked by a locked door, but Adrian simply kicked it open. The duo went inside, shutting the door behind them. The woman hit a light switch as she did so.

A dimly lit fluorescent bulb flickered to life, illuminating the small, cluttered room. It was filled with boxes and machinery, stacked in the corners and covered with dust. Other than that it was pretty much empty. Adrian sat down on a box by the door, running his hands through his slick wet black hair. The woman sat down across from him, wringing her shirt. She placed the case on the box beside her, suddenly very intent on checking its contents.

"Who are you, really?" she said after a minute of silence. She didn't look at him, instead choosing to ruffle through the contents of the case. "You're not dressed like a citizen, and you don't look like any CP I've ever seen." Adrian shrugged half-heartedly. "I told you. I'm Corporal Adrian Shephard, of the Hazardous Environment Combat Unit. I don't know if you've ever heard of it?"

"Never heard of your unit, never heard of you."

"Well, what's your name?" Adrian asked, slightly put off by her flat response.

"Jill Townshend," she replied quietly. She shifted on her seat, wincing as she moved her ankle. "You're hurt," Adrian said, concerned. She shrugged. "It's nothing. I twisted my ankle when I was running from Civil Protection."

"Here, let me see it," Adrian offered, moving towards her. "I've had some first aid training in the military." Jill proffered her foot without argument. Adrian ran his fingers across her ankle, feeling her shiver with pain as he did so. His fingers greedily stroked her skin, taking in the sensation of touch — just touching another person felt so foreign, so strange. Adrian's eyes drifted upward toward her face, but her head was bent, her curtain of red hair hiding her face.

"It's not broken," Adrian said after a minute. "It's just a strain. If you keep off it for a little while it should heal in no time." Jill nodded slightly. "Thank you," she said softly. He released her

ankle with slight disappointment. Silence stretched between them, lasting several minutes. Adrian, meanwhile, was bursting with questions. Finally he wasn't able to stay silent any longer.

"You mentioned Civil Protection. Are they the guys who attacked us?" Adrian asked. Jill nodded dully. "The Combine have taken over the entire planet. The masked officers we just saw were Civil Protection officers, humans who joined forces with the Combine for better living standards and more privileges. They serve as the police force in most remaining urban centres."

Shit.

"So theseâ€¦ Combine, you said, have taken over everything on Earth? How?" he asked. "When?"

"Years and years ago," Jill replied.

"What year is it now?" Adrian asked, afraid of the answer.

She told him.

Oh my Godâ€¦ Adrian put a hand over his eyes, an icy feeling of shock coursing through him. He had been away for almost twenty years. Before he could wrap his head around that massive bit of information, Jill spoke.

"How come you don't know any of this?" she asked, looking into his eyes with worry and confusion etched across her face. "Anybody who has been around for the past decade or so would know about the Combine invasion."

"Iâ€¦" Adrian faltered. He knew Jill would never believe him if he told her the truth. "I was captured by anâ€¦ enemy force while I was on a mission at the Black Mesa Research Facility."

To his surprise, the girl's eyes widened, and she stared at him incredulously. "You were directly involved with the Black Mesa Incident?" she whispered. "Wow!"

"You know about Black Mesa?" Adrian asked, surprised. He had expected some sort of government cover up to have taken place, masking the truth of the events which had occurred there. "How?"

"Everyone knows about Black Mesa!" Jill said breathlessly, shifting on her box. "The aftermath of the Black Mesa Incident had a huge widespread ripple effect on the rest of the world, kind of like dropping a stone in the middle of a pond. Portal storms began and started appearing all over the world. The Combine were the ones opening the portals, using their portal-network satellite."

Adrian struggled to take in what she was telling him. "So you mean after Black Mesa went down, it had a negative effect on the rest of the planet?"

Jill nodded, auburn hair waving. "That's right. All types of alien life-forms teleported into the suburbs. Soon Earth was in chaos, and there was a huge population shift as everyone moved into the cities to escape the creatures. Earth's soldiers managed to put up protections around the cities, and the aliens outside continued to

take over the countryside and remaining rural areas. The Vortigaunts who had recently been freed also escaped to Earth, running from the Combine."

Adrian's mind whirled. "Vortigaunts?" "You mean those weird scaly aliens with the third arm that shoot lightning bolts?" he asked. Jill nodded. "That's them."

"At Black Mesa they were trying to kill me."

"They were enslaved. After the destruction of Black Mesa they were freed, and they came to Earth to escape from the Combine." Adrian frowned. He wasn't too happy about the idea that those weird, threatening aliens who had killed so many of his teammates were residing on his own planet. However, everything Jill had told him was disturbing.

"So what happened after that?" Adrian asked. Jill's eyes suddenly became filled with sadness. When she spoke, her voice was low and quiet. "The Combine invaded. They decimated Earth's entire forces in seven hours, killing millions and enslaving the rest. They've ruled us ever since."

The shocking finality of her words crashed upon his ears, and he stared at her blankly. Earth was enslaved? It wasn't possible. Adrian sat back, thinking furiously about what Jill had said. He waited for her to speak again, but she had leaned back against her box and was watching him with bright eyes.

"I don't understand," Adrian said slowly. "Why didn't we resist? We should have fought!"

Jill shook her head. "We did resist. The entire world forgot their grievances and united against the Combine. Russia, China, Britain, the States. It was no good. We failed." Adrian closed his eyes. It wasn't possible.

"You killed and incapacitated three Civil Protection officers, and you didn't even get injured," Jill said, staring into his eyes. They were so vivid, so green. "You spoke back to them as though they were nothing. You challenged them."

"So?"

"So, nobody ever does that," Jill said. "Most people are too afraid to speak out against the outrages of the Combine, and for good reason. The Resistance always works in the shadows, so even we can't do anything to fight directly against the Combine. When we challenge them, we do so without their notice. But you? You just put yourself and all of us in incredible danger."

Adrian felt a thin twinge of annoyance. "How? They were going to kill us. One of them almost did kill you. Did you expect me to just sit by twiddling my thumbs while they did?"

Jill didn't smile. "You saved my life, and I'm grateful for that. But the facts still stand: we're all in danger now. Nobody speaks out against the Combine publicly, it's too dangerous. Now that you've attacked those officers, when they don't report in the Combine will know something's up. One of them is still alive up there. When he

wakes up he'll go straight to the other CPs and then the entire city will be on the lookout for you."

Perfect. That's just swell. "Then let them," he said shortly. "I told you, I'm not afraid of those white-faced bastards. If they come after me, they'll get a bit more than they bargained for."

Jill shook her head exasperatedly. "They'll kill you, don't you get it? You're one man! The entire city is run by them. You'll never win."

"I'll do something," Adrian said decisively. Regardless of what she said, he couldn't stand by and let this oppression continue. Maybe the world had fallen and died, but he wasn't about to accept his world's destruction, not lying down on the ground like a whipped dog. "I'm going to fight."

Jill sighed. "Fine, you do what you want, stranger. But for the time being, I suggest laying low. Come back to my residential sector with me. You can talk to my father, he's a pretty big member of the Resistance. He'll get you started on whatever you need to do."

Adrian nodded. "All right. Thank you for offering to help me." Jill smiled slightly. "I told you, you saved my life. It's the least I can do." She cast him a furtive glance from beneath her curtain of red hair, but as he looked back at her, she quickly looked away. "The patrols should be gone by now. Let's hurry."

"Okay," Adrian said, and he followed the red-haired woman into the darkness of the tunnel, wondering what lay ahead.

4. Lambda Fighters

The journey back to Jill's residential sector was not an easy one. The darkened, misused tunnel stretched on deeper into the city, where the noise and activity of the Combine patrols overhead reached their ears even through the tunnel ceiling. Jill seemed to grow more and more anxious as she led him through the dark winding tunnel, pausing every time a chorus of muffled footsteps and roaring tires passed overhead. Adrian followed close behind, shooting constant glances back down the subway tunnel as they moved onwards.

Throughout the trip, Jill was silent. The only words she uttered were "don't fall behind" when they had left the maintenance room. Adrian debated asking her what was bothering her — she seemed to be even more on edge than when the Civil Protection officers had attacked them — but he ultimately decided against it. Whatever was troubling her, he doubted she would confide in him, a total stranger.

After what seemed like an age, they came to another subway station, which had fallen into disrepair. An abandoned tram car was unmoving on the tracks, covered with rust and dirt. The door leading into the closest car was ajar, and the interior was dark and filthy. Halfway down the platform there was an unlit exit sign and a stairway. Jill motioned towards it with her head.

"This is as far as we can go. We're going to have to risk being caught seen by the Combine aboveground. This station's as close as

we're going to get to my place."

"How far is it?" Adrian asked, hauling himself onto the subway platform and reaching a hand down to pull Jill up. Her hand was cool and small within his own.

"About twenty minutes on foot," she replied tersely, checking her green leather case for the umpteenth time. She turned to face him fully for the first time since they had set out. Her auburn hair fell over one of her eyes, and the other stared out at him, bright and green.

"Just so you know, we stand a pretty good chance of being captured by a patrol squad as soon as we go topside," she said quietly. "And I can't afford to be captured by the Combine now. Don't fall behind."

"I'm not going to fall behind," Adrian said.

"Good. And just so you know, don't pull another stunt like the one you pulled earlier, or we'll be captured or killed for sure."

"Another stunt like saving your life?" Adrian asked bluntly. Jill sighed. "This isn't a game, Adrian. I'm not kidding. Thank you, you did me a great service, but you don't know how much damage it will do to the Resistance if I'm captured."

"I used to be a Marine, Jill," Adrian said. "You're not going to get captured if I can help it. And we're wasting time here, so we might as well get moving."

She nodded slightly, staring at him for another second, before turning on her heel and walking as quickly as she could towards the stairway despite her limp. Adrian followed close behind, wishing, not for the first time, that he had thought to grab one of the fallen officers' weapons before they ran.

As they ascended the stairs, the grey sky illuminated the dark walls around them. They were covered with graffiti, mostly random scribbling that looked to be gang insignias. Every so often there were propaganda posters sporting a single logo: a yellow circle surrounded by a two pronged object, with elaborate letters spelling out CMB.

The Combine's insignia, I assumeâ€|

Further down the wall there was a strange drawing of a grown man, crouching, holding an infant in his arms. He turned to Jill to ask what the graffiti meant, but she had already reached the top of the stairs, and was moving out of sight.

Hurrying to catch up with her, Adrian lengthened his strides and climbed to the top of the stairs. Looking around, he saw a large intersection, with large grey buildings menacingly looming overhead. Black dots swarmed through the sky around them. The intersection itself was deserted, but Adrian could see the outline of an APC further down one of the streets, gleaming sinisterly in the dreary light.

"This way," Jill whispered, and she headed down an empty street, covered with rubble and huge chunks of broken concrete. Ruined apartment complexes line the street, some with great chunks broken off, almost as though they had been hit with RPGs or other explosives. Great hunks of stone and destroyed cement dotted the road, which was pockmarked with deep pits of destroyed asphalt. The city must have been through one hell of a war.

Adrian followed Jill through the rubble, picking his way around the giant potholes in the street and clambering over the mountains of destroyed stone that dotted the street. The rain was still coming down, although not as hard as it had been before. It was only lightly drizzling, pattering down on his already damp clothes and skin.

As he walked around the edge of another hole in the street, his foot came down on something hard and round. Looking down, he saw a porcelain doll's head beneath his heel. However, one side of its face had been blown away, leaving behind a cracked, burnt mess.

Adrian, despite Jill's hurry, knelt beside the rubble and scraped some dirt off the doll's head. Its face, once a creamy peach colour, was now so scarred and pitted with dirt and grime that it was nearly unrecognizable. Its remaining eye was caked shut with dirt. He scraped some away with a fingernail and a flash of dull blue met his eyes.

Adrian's stomach twisted with anger and sadness. How many children had suffered at the hands of these alien invaders?

"Come on, let's go!" Jill's voice abruptly died as she came up next to him. Adrian looked up. The red-haired woman was gazing down at the doll's head in his hand, her normally bright eyes shuttered and forbidding. Her fingers were clenching and unclenching at her sides, as though she ached to wrap them around someone's throat. Adrian felt a chill as he looked at her.

"Jill?"

"Keep moving," she said flatly, turning away from him and continuing down the ruined street. Nonplussed, Adrian followed her, moving through the rubble and further into City 17.

x x x x

Gordon stared at the girl before him, eyes wide with surprise. The last time he had seen Alyx, she was an infant. She had matured very well, he noted. She looked a lot like her mother, but he could see traces of Eli in her as well.

"My dad worked with you in Black Mesa, remember?" she said as Gordon dusted himself off. "I'm sure you don't remember me though."

"No, I do," Gordon replied, wincing as he gingerly probed the wound on his back. "I used to visit you and Azian back in the dorms at Black Mesa with Barney and Dr. Kleiner sometimes."

"Yeah, Dad used to tell me," Alyx said, a faint trace of a smile on her face. Gordon straightened up and looked at her. "Alyx, I'm very sorry that your mother didn't make it out of Black Mesa."

She nodded slightly, looking down. She opened her mouth to say something, when one of the Civil Protection officers at their feet groaned and shifted a little.

"No time for reminiscing, Gordon, we've got to get moving," Alyx said, striding quickly and purposefully toward an elevator in the corner of the room. Gordon followed her, glancing down as he did so. Seven prone bodies garbed in white masks lay on the floor.

"You sure know how to handle yourself," he said admiringly as they stepped into the elevator. Alyx grinned as she took a small key out of her pocket and inserted it into the wall panel; with a loud whirring noise, the elevator rumbled to life and began to descend. The room slowly drifted out of sight, replaced by blank stone walls as the lift moved lower.

"In times like these, you can't afford not to know how to handle yourself," Alyx replied, replacing the key in her pocket and leaning against the elevator wall. A stray strand of dark hair fell over her face and she blew it away.

She's gotten quite attractive, Gordon thought, and then felt appalled. She was his oldest friend's daughter, for God's sake. She had to be twenty years younger than him, at least.

Speaking of which, have I been aging while I've been kept in that stasis? Gordon wondered as the elevator shuddered to a halt. I hope to hell that I haven't. _

"Man of few words, aren't you?" Alyx asked, shaking him out of his trance.

"Sorry," he said, as the doors opened and revealed a dingy looking storage room, devoid of anything except dusty boxes and a red painted pallet. "It's justâ€¦ a lot to absorb, you know. I haven't exactly been around recently."

"We know," Alyx said, heading towards a corner of the room, knocking some boxes out of the way with the toe of her boot. "We didn't even know you had escaped Black Mesa alive until today."

"How did you manage to find me?" Gordon asked. Alyx bent over the boxes, clearing a space in the corner. Gordon determinedly stared at the ceiling. A faded yellow propaganda poster sporting an image of Wallace Breen was tacked to the wall.

"Barney was on duty viewing the incoming transfer citizens when your train came in," Alyx said, straightening up and beginning to fiddle with a control panel on the wall next to the poster. "He happened to see you on one of the monitors and sent a message to Dr. Kleiner. I was in the lab when Barney called, so Dr. Kleiner sent me out to find you."

Alyx keyed something into the wall panel and to Gordon's surprise, the section of wall covered by the Breen poster shifted to the side, revealing a cleverly concealed doorway.

"It's just through here to Dr. Kleiner's place," Alyx said, brushing her hair back and motioning through the doorway, at the dimly lit hallway beyond. "We'd better get moving."

Gordon nodded and followed her down the hall, towards Dr. Kleiner's hidden laboratory.

x x x x

Like Jill had said, her apartment complex was twenty minutes away. However, it took them much longer than that to get there, as they had to stop every so often to avoid patrols of Civil Protection officers and their APCs. Several times Adrian and Jill were forced to hide in alleyways, behind dumpsters, and in storage containers while waiting uncomfortably for the CPs to move on.

At last Jill led him around to the back of a large apartment building, its stone walls marred with cracks and gouges. There was a large courtyard at the rear of the building, with dead brown stalks of grass waving slightly in the cold air. The area was devoid of people, citizens and officers alike.

Jill led him to a grey steel door at one end of the building and pulled it open. Inside was a dimly lit storage room, littered with broken furniture, large wooden boxes, and an inch-thick layer of dust.

"Hurry up, come inside before someone sees," Jill whispered, her voice sounding strangely loud in the piercing quiet of the room. Adrian quickly followed her through the doorway, and she shut it behind him, picking up a small wooden board from beside the door and wedging it tightly between the handle. Adrian felt some of the tension leave his shoulders as the cold air was cut off from the room. The sound of the rain outside immediately quieted.

"Follow me," Jill said softly, heading across the room towards another door, this one wide open. A flickering EXIT sign hung lopsided over it. Adrian walked behind her, picking his way through the discarded furniture and broken household possessions that littered the dusty floor.

"Why's all this stuff down here?" Adrian asked in a low voice as they exited the storage room and began climbing a long, twisting stairwell leading to the apartment complex. "The Combine took everyone's personal possessions and trashed them?"

"Basically," Jill said quietly, her eyes narrowing at the injustice, her mouth a thin line. "They do everything they can to keep us as downtrodden as possible. They confiscate our personal items, destroy them, and send them back. They take away all the good food we once had and the only people that get it are the Civil Protection officers that work for them. Even basic, everyday thingsâ€¦ coffee, tea, blankets, electricityâ€¦ they cut us off from all of it. Our apartments have no insulation and barely any heating, so during winters we always freeze. Lots of the older citizens die."

Adrian felt a cold rage deep in the pit of his stomach. "I can't believe they can get away with all of this."

Jill looked sideways at him as they climbed the stairs. Something sparked in her eyes. "They won't forever, as long as I and every person in the Resistance have something to say about it."

Adrian admired her optimism, but couldn't help wondering if it was just wishful thinking. Based on what he had seen, the Combine had effectively crushed the human civilization and were holding them in an iron stranglehold.

They began to pass long hallways, lined with scuffed and dirty doorways. Most were closed, but several were open. As they climbed, Adrian had a fleeting glimpse of a dirty and filthy interior before the floor vanished beneath them.

Jill's apartment was at the top floor of the building. They reached the final hallway before the steps began leading towards the roof. Jill turned into the hall and went to a door in the middle of it, carefully stepping over small shards of broken glass that glittered like diamonds beneath her worn sneakers.

When they reached the door, Jill raised her hand and rapped on it sharply, tapping out a series of knocks that were obviously some sort of signal. After a brief pause, someone responded with a series of rapid taps from the other side.

"Inside, Adrian, hurry," Jill whispered, opening the door with one hand and motioning him forward with the other, still holding the writing case. Adrian stepped over the threshold into the apartment, Jill following close behind.

The first thing Adrian noticed was a thin figure leaning against the wall ahead of them. A bright fluorescent bulb hanging from a chain in the centre of the entrance hall threw his outline into sharp relief.

He was older than Adrian by at least a decade, judging by the graying strands of hair at his temples. The majority of his hair was black, pulled into a ponytail behind his head. Sharp greyish-brown irises gazed out at him from a gaunt, skull-like face, skin stretched tight across bones. The dark shadows beneath his eyes contrasted starkly to the pale white skin of his face.

"News?" the man asked, his voice a little raspy, as though he had a sore throat.

"I haven't had a chance to examine it," Jill replied, her voice right behind his ear, and Adrian started. He had almost forgotten she was there.

"Who is this?" the man inquired sharply, examining Adrian with a cursory look. "He's not dressed like a citizen."

"His name's Adrian, I found him in Block 22-B. He was alone," Jill replied. The man continued to stare at him with sharp, untrusting eyes. "Is he one of the Condemned?" the man asked. Jill hesitated, and Adrian felt another stab of confusion. What were the Condemned?

"I don't think he was originally, but we got into a spot of trouble on the way back here," Jill said, delicately phrasing her words. The man looked alarmed. "What kind of trouble?"

"He killed two Civil Protection officers," Jill said, and the man took a step forward, eyes flashing. "Are you insane?" he hissed, his

voice low with panic. "You're telling me all the commotion being raised out there is because of you? You brought an Anticitizen into our apartment!"

Jill raised her hand. "Adam, please, just calm down. We don't turn people away, you know that."

"Of course I do, but the rules are a bit different when you bring one of the Condemned into the headquarters of â€œ"

The man suddenly clamped his jaw shut, looking wary. Adrian, who until this point had been feeling distinctly guilty, not to mention annoyed, felt a surge of interest.

"The Resistance? Here?" he probed, studying the man for a sign of confirmation, but the wiry man gave none. "I didn't know the main base of operations was here," he said, turning to Jill. "Well, I mean, I knew you were a part of it and all but I still didn't â€œ"

"Can this wait until after we sit down?" Jill interrupted, looking at the man called Adam. He grunted, unfolded his arms from across his blue scruffy shirt, turned away and headed down the hall and into a doorway on the left. Jill followed him, her rain-slicked shoes squeaking slightly on the hardwood floor.

As Adrian moved down the hall, he could hear low voices at work. "All right, good, you get right on that," someone said in a gruff, powerful tone, and then there was a furious tapping of computer keys. Jill motioned for him to hurry up, and he hastened to follow her into the room.

Four people were clustered around a computer monitor, conversing quietly about a variety of diagrams and symbols on the screen. It looked as though they were examining a detailed map of a city, complete with coloured lines, red circles, and flashing sections of buildings.

One of the men at the computer looked over. Adrian got a quick glance of a graying beard and moustache, and a large brown pipe dangling between them, before the large burly figure shot to its feet and seized Jill in a hug.

"Where the hell have you been?" the man asked in a low, irritated whisper, his voice gravelly in the quiet room. "I've been worried sick about you! We thought you'd been captured!"

Jill returned the hug with enthusiasm. "I'm sorry, Daddy, I got help up, and I found someone outside who needed some help." She inclined her head towards Adrian, who had been standing awkwardly by the doorway until this point.

"Not dressed like one of us," was the first thing out of the man's mouth, and Adrian felt annoyed again. Was that all anyone was going to say to him?

The burly man released Jill and focused on Adrian fully for the first time. The man was huge, his chest and shoulders wide and powerful beneath the blue citizen uniform. The sleeves were bulging at the seams, his corded muscles straining the rough material. The cuffs of

his pants were worn and tattered, and there was a large rip at the left knee. His face was weathered and war-torn, with a thick graying beard and moustache covering his lower face. A large, ropy scar slashed across his left eye, shining in the light like a sharp crescent. Beneath the scar, a bright green eye the exact colour and shape of Jill's met his gaze thoughtfully yet powerfully. Adrian's first impression was that this was not a man to cross.

"Who are you?" the man asked, and his deep voice rumbled across the room like rolling thunder. Adrian felt somewhat cowed looking at him. The guy was huge.

"I'm Adrian Shephard," he replied, in a voice not as deep but just as powerful as the one he was being addressed in. "I'm sorry to intrude upon your home."

The man stared at him with those piercing green eyes, and Adrian felt a strange feeling in his stomach as he met the man's gaze. It was disconcerting to see Jill's eyes looking at him from such a rough and menacing face. Nevertheless, he stared back evenly, until the man spoke again.

"My name is Ken Townshend," he said, holding out a large calloused hand. Adrian reached out and had his arm wrung. "Why don't you take a seat, Adrian? We've got a lot to discuss." He motioned to a decrepit grey sofa in the corner of the room. Adrian walked over to it and sat down, shifting uncomfortably under the stare of the group of people at the computers. One was a dark-skinned woman with piercing eyes, wearing a tattered gold chain around her throat. She had a combat knife belted to her hip. Another was a wiry and young American, with dirty blond hair and an amiable expression, although at the moment it was laced with confusion. The last person was a powerful looking man with short black hair and a grim expression. Noticing Adrian's discomfort, Jill took several strides across the room and sat down next to him, giving him a nod and a smile of encouragement. He returned it somewhat feebly, grateful for her presence. She seemed much more at ease now that she was back in the apartment.

Jill's father, Ken, turned to Adam, who was leaning against a doorframe in the corner of the room, staring at Adrian distrustfully. "Couldn't make us a cup of coffee, could you, Adam?" he asked. "I think Jill could use it." True enough, Jill looked exhausted, her eyes only half-open. Adam nodded and withdrew silently from the room. Ken leaned over the shoulder of the black woman by the computer and whispered to her in a low tone. The woman nodded, shooting Adrian a brief look, before beginning to type rapidly. Ken then strode across the room and pulled a chair away from a dining table, dropping down into it with his legs spread and his huge arms crossed over his barrel-like chest.

"So, Adrian, first things first," he said. "How exactly did you come to be in City 17?" Adrian shrugged, feeling hot around the collar. "Iâ€| was recently let go by an organization, only a few hours ago. They left me in the city."

Ken stared at him doubtfully. "And where were you before this?"

"It's hard to explain," Adrian said dryly, smiling inwardly at the

prospect of explaining the G-Man to Ken. Jill's father looked at him for another moment, and eventually nodded. "Very well. How exactly did you meet Jill?" Slowly, Adrian recounted the story of their encounter, ignoring the gasps and looks of surprise that emanated from the people at the computers when he reached the part involving him killing the Civil Protection officers. At this point, Adam re-entered the room and wordlessly deposited coffee mugs before Ken, Jill, and Adrian. Ken nodded thanks as Jill took a long sip, shuddering happily and closing her tired eyes. Going on, Adrian told Ken how he and Jill had hidden in the maintenance room, and then gone on to reach the apartment while avoiding the patrols. Ken listened passively the entire time, eyes never leaving Adrian's face. When it was clear Adrian had finished talking, Ken spoke.

"Adrian, I may not know who you are, but I must thank you for saving my daughter. Every time she goes out I'm worried sick, and there's never anything I can do for her. I wish I could go out in her place, but I have to monitor things here and keep the shop running. Thank you for helping her. I don't know what I'd do if I lost her."

"It's no problem," Adrian said weakly, feeling distinctly embarrassed as Jill and her father exchanged a half-loving, half-chiding glance. For something to do, Adrian brought the chipped mug to his lips and sipped the scalding coffee. He almost choked it up, so unused was he to its taste. The bitter black liquid seared his parched throat, setting fire to his unused taste buds and sending his head into a whirl of ecstasy.

"What?" Adam said, noticing Adrian's reaction. "Doesn't taste good enough for you?"

"No," Adrian started, but Ken held up a hand, glancing disapprovingly at Adam. "Don't mind him, Adrian, he's just a little distrustful of strangers, and I don't blame him at all considering the times." Adam didn't meet his look, but stared at the wall, arms crossed over his chest. Jill looked at him with a worried glance before turning to Adrian. "Coffee is one of the things that was taken from the citizens after the war," she explained. "Normally, only the Civil Protection officers have access to it. But we have some people working on the inside that smuggle it out and distribute it among the citizens. They're very discreet, so it's never a constant thing, but they try. That's how we get access to a lot of things, like sugar and whatnot."

Adrian nodded, taking all of this in. _I never thought I'd live in a world without sugar. Man, Mom always said that would happen if I ate too much of it. I just never imagined this would be the way it disappeared._

To break the silence, Adrian asked something that had been bothering him for a while. "What exactly are the Condemned?" At his words, a collective shudder seemed to resonate within the room, and the expressions around him grew somber. It was Ken who answered him.

"The Condemned are citizens who are wanted by the Combine for questioning or relocation to Nova Prospekt. That used to be a high security prison complex, but now it's used for something far worse. We don't know what. Anyways, if the Combine are looking for you, then you're basically doomed. Those types of people adopted all kinds of

names: the Condemned, the Blacklistedâ€¦ because any way you slice it, they're screwed."

"And that's what I am now?" Adrian said, not wanting to hear the answer, but expecting it regardless. Ken sighed, a deep rumbling sound. "I hate to say it, but it looks like it. Anyone who shows signs of outright opposition against the Combine is blacklisted. Still, as long as you lay low, you shouldn't have too much difficulty, unless they make you an Anticitizen."

"What's that?" Adrian asked. It was Jill who answered him this time, still leaning back against the couch with her eyes closed. "Citizens who have been declared dangerous and have a death mark on their heads. Anyone who sees them have to report them to the Combine, or their entire residential sector is re-located or sent to Nova Prospekt."

This sent a chill through Adrian's bones. "I should go. I'm endangering all of you just by being here." He made a move to stand up, but Jill placed her soft, cool hand on his own to stop him. "We're members of the Resistance, Adrian. If any single one of us is captured it means the downfall of us all. We're hardly worse off by having you around; if anything, this could help us greatly." She smiled at him. Adrian still felt unconvinced, but he sat back down slowly. Adam looked doubtful.

Ken nodded satisfactorily. "Jilly's right. Good to have you on board, Adrian. Meet the rest of the team."

He motioned over his shoulder, indicating the dark-skinned woman with the combat knife. "This is Sonya. She's our tech expert, works with anything we can salvage or steal from the Combine to better understand their technology."

Sonya nodded at him, staring with those piercing eyes. "If we can find any weaknesses, then we can exploit them."

"Nice to meet you," Adrian said. She smiled at him briefly before turning back to the computer screen.

"This is Michael Storm, our â€œ"

"Call me Mike," the wiry blond American interrupted, grinning at Adrian, his blue eyes bright and friendly. Adrian got an immediate impression of amiability. "I specialize in mechanics. Vehicle and weapons specialist. I can drive anything and fix anything."

"In case you hadn't noticed, Mikey here is the youngest," Ken said, eyebrows raised. Sonya laughed, while Mike smirked and folded his hands behind his head. The last man, the muscle-bound one with the serious eyes, sat silent and still next to him.

"That's Peter Tarasov. Man of few words, you'll soon come to see. He takes care of our security issues and contact with other Resistance members." The hulking Peter nodded at him once, face betraying no emotion whatsoever. Adrian felt distinctly awkward around these people.

"And you've met Adam already, I believe." The two men turned to look at each other, and Adrian almost saw a spark of dislike flare in

Adam's eyes as he glared at him. Adrian stared right back, refusing to be ruffled by the man's animosity. At length, Adam turned away.

"In any case, we need to get around to dissecting the contents of that case," Ken said, getting to his feet and clapping his hands once. "Let's â€"

Suddenly an ecstatic voice rang out through the room. "Shit! Holy shit! Ken, I got it!"

Adrian started wildly, glancing around. He couldn't tell where the voice had come from. Ken sighed, rolling his eyes. "That," he said, "is Jonah."

Adrian looked where Ken was indicating and to his surprise saw a figure slumped so low in a chair that he had been invisible. Looking at him now, Adrian was surprised he had missed him â€" especially considering the puffs of grey smoke that were emanating from his general vicinity.

"Jonah serves as our computer analyst and hacker," Ken said in a disgruntled tone. "And a damn good one he is, or we wouldn't keep him around." Jonah laughed, a low, gravelly sound that for some reason Adrian immediately liked. He looked African American, and was dressed in tattered jeans and a worn blue shirt with the sleeves torn off. A joint of marijuana protruded from his lips.

Adrian stared at him, nonplussed. Next to him, Jill was stifling giggles behind her hand. When Adrian looked at her in confusion, she laughed even harder. "Jonah works best when he has a pick-me-up," she managed to choke out. As if to confirm this, Jonah blew a cloud of smoke into the air, and soon Mike and Sonya were rolling in their seats as well.

Watching Jill, Adrian realized it was the first time he had heard her laugh. It was a beautiful sound, rich and sweet. He felt himself relax slightly.

"Yes, yes," Ken said in an aggravated tone. "Very funny. Let's get back to business, shall we? Jonah, did you get the link up and running between here and Kleiner's place?"

"Gotcha, Chief," Jonah replied, coughing slightly. "All systems go. Kleiner says he's putting the finishing touches on the teleporter now, and it should be ready within an hour or so."

"Good," Ken replied. "Get a message through to him and tell him we'll send him the latest news shortly. Sonya, Adam, Peter, crack that case open and let's get to it. We burn it as soon as we have it documented, got it?"

"Got it," they chorused. Ken nodded once and left the room. Still confused, Adrian turned to Jill, who was smiling sleepily and curled up in a ball on the couch. "Weed is still around?"

"Not really," Jill giggled. "One of our undercover CPs, Barney, patches it through during patrols or block raids. It's a risk stealing drugs from the CP stash, but nobody ever notices it's missing, and the Combine only confiscated it in the first place

because people stopped caring what they said when they were using it."

"Right," Adrian said weakly. Jill laughed. "You'll get used to this stuff. And don't worry, it's temporary, until we can defeat the Combine." Adrian nodded, feeling mounting respect for this group of survivors. "I'm glad I met you," he said, watching her.

Jill smiled at him, a smile as bright and hopeful and full of life as her eyes, and Adrian felt some of his despair melt away. "Welcome to the Resistance," she said.

5. A Red Letter Day

"You know, it's funny you, showing up on this day in particular," Alyx mused as she led Gordon through the dark hallway. He raised an eyebrow to her statement, looking over his shoulder every so often to make sure they weren't being followed. Without a weapon or his HEV suit, he felt very... exposed.

"We've been helping people escape the city on foot," Alyx continued, in response to his unasked question. "We've got a whole Underground Railroad thing going on. A lot of the Condemned have had to flee the city, so we've set up some shelters in the old canals."

Alyx continued forward at a brisk pace, idly weaving her way around a steady drip of dirty water coming from a septic pipe above them. Gordon carefully stepped around it. "Condemned?"

"Citizens that are wanted for interrogation. That's the same as a death sentence nowadays."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

They continued onward, moving through a maze of dimly lit hallways. Gordon tried to keep track of all the turns they made, in case they had to find their way back, but there were so many that his head was beginning to spin. In any case, Alyx seemed completely at ease with the route, as though she had traveled it countless times. He relaxed slightly and let her lead the way.

"Oh!" Alyx said brightly and unexpectedly, causing him to start. "I forgot to mention that Dr. Kleiner has been working on a new method of transporting citizens to my father's lab. The canals are very dangerous; they get raided all the time. He's putting the finishing touches on it now, but he'll probably want to run some of the finer points past you."

This intrigued Gordon. "What is it?"

Alyx shot him a mischievous look. "I'll let him tell you, wouldn't want to ruin the surprise." Gordon raised an eyebrow again and Alyx laughed, her voice echoing through the empty halls. Gordon liked the sound, but it reverberated dismally through the blank passageway and seemed much more depressing than it should have.

"Here we are," Alyx said, coming to a halt before a worn, beat up

vending machine. A lambda symbol within a circle, like the one he used to have on his Hazard Suit, was spray painted on the wall. Gordon cast a cursory glance over the machine, nonplussed. "Kleiner lives in a soda machine?"

"Of course not," Alyx giggled. "Here, let me buy you a drink."

She fished a small silver coin out of her tight back pocket (Gordon determinedly stared at the ceiling again), and put it through the coin slot. The vending machine groaned loudly, and then, to his utter surprise, the machine's front swung outward like a door, revealing a passage into a brightly lit laboratory room.

"Voila," Alyx said, motioning him through. Gordon clambered inside, ducking slightly, but he still smacked his head against the low ceiling of the passage. Cursing quietly, he squeezed inside, looking around in wonderment at the laboratory. Tables overflowing with notes and sketches of some complex machine were spaced here and there around the room. One wall of the lab was completely devoted to large computer screens, showing various images of the city streets and buildings outside. Another wall was covered with storage boxes, both on the ground level and on a small balcony above it. For some odd reason, it was also littered with many broken cat carrying cases. A large whirring machine with a transparent glass case was humming in the opposite corner of the room, next to multiple computers and a machine that was etching out a complicated series of numbers and formulas onto a long sheet of yellowed paper.

Gordon was speechless. He hadn't seen a lab in the longest time. He wanted to touch everything at once, immerse himself in the computer screens, work the machines. He held himself back with effort.

"Blast that little â€" where did she get to? Lamarr? Come out of there!"

Gordon turned and, feeling a surge of recognition and pleasure, saw his old mentor, Dr. Kleiner, bent over with his head inside one of the broken carrying cases. Muttered exclamations and curses floated out from the box. Gordon exchanged a quick look with Alyx, and she smiled in a way that suggested she had seen this many times before.

"Everything okay, Doc?" Alyx asked, smirking slightly and leaning against the computer desk.

"Oh, hello Alyx," Dr. Kleiner said, not turning around. "Well, almost okay. Lamarr has gotten out of her crate again. If I didn't know better, I would suspect Barney of trapping and â€" he pulled himself out of the crate, mopping his bright pink face with a handkerchief. Then, catching sight of Gordon, he let out a happy shout.

"Great Scott! Gordon Freeman, it really is you, isn't it?"

"I'd like to think so," Gordon said dryly, leaning against the desk beside Alyx.

"I found him wandering around outside," Alyx said, smirking at him. "Bit of a troublemaker, isn't he?" The subject of said trouble merely raised his eyebrows and pushed his glasses up further on his nose.

"You could say that," Dr. Kleiner said, laughing. "We owe a great deal to Doctor Freeman, even if trouble does tend to follow in his wake."

"What are you working on, Isaac?" Gordon asked, feeling his insatiable curiosity gnawing at his insides.

"Alyx didn't tell you?" Dr. Kleiner asked, looking puzzled. Alyx scoffed. "I would have ruined the finer points, what with the electronic transfusions and molecular displacements â€" they put me to sleep. It's Point A to Point B, you take the honours."

"A teleporter?" Gordon asked, intrigued. "You don't say."

"Yes, we've resurrected the idea after the fiascos of Black Mesa," Dr. Kleiner said conversationally. "Alyx just installed the last piece yesterday morning. Despite what she says, she has quite a flare for quantum physics."

"I hate that stuff," Alyx said vehemently. "I can't take any credit for the breakthrough, Doctor."

"Nonsense," Dr. Kleiner said airily. "Your talents surpass your loveliness."

"Doc," Alyx said, blushing slightly and glancing furtively at Gordon. "Let's just see if this thing works okay?"

"Good idea," Dr. Kleinr said. "Gordon, would you mind helping me fine tune the machine? I'll explain the concept of how it works in the meantime."

Gordon nodded, feeling excited. Finally, he was back in his element.

There was a rush of air from behind them and Barney stepped through the lab entrance, looking harried. "Gordon? Good, you're here," he said hurriedly. "Damn, Gordon, you stirred up the hive! All Civil Protection units have been notified to bring you in. We can't keep him here too long, Doc, it'll jeopardize everything we've worked for."

"He's coming with me," Alyx called from the wall of monitors, which she was now perusing. "We're going to my father's as soon as the Doctors of wonder make sure the teleporter's working."

"Really?" Barney said with interest. "It works? For real this time?"

Gordon barely heard them; he was too immersed in Dr. Kleiner's work. "Basically, we're going to inaugurate the new teleport with a double transmission," Dr. Kleiner was saying.

"Increased frequencies?" Gordon asked.

"Naturally. The elementary particles are encoded via electronic signals â€"

" â€"and instantaneous? Do we still use the reconstruction method?"

Because only photons â€œ"

"â€œ no, we've branched away from quantum teleportation. Using Xen as an interdimensional slingshot, we create an instantaneous dissolve of elementary particles, which are then transferred to the arbitrary destination at speeds faster than light travel â€œ"

"â€œ displacement? Oh, yeah, that would work, using the dimensional aspect â€œ"

" â€œand in theory, the original subject is preserved intact â€œ"

" â€œat the new destination!" Gordon finished.

Barney and Alyx stared at the two doctors, completely flummoxed. "Point A to Point B," they said in unison.

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"I've got something," Adam announced from his position on the floor, where he was sifting through some floor plans he had salvaged from the green case. "Sonya, run Sector X44 into the computer, check their surveillance for that area."

There was a rapid succession of keyboard tapping. "Got it," Sonya announced a short pause later. "Cameras in that sector were sabotaged. They're viewing X47 instead. No surveillance there at the moment, until the spot the error. It's Reilly, it's got to be."

"Good," Adam said. "Call Kleiner and tell him that Canals Four through Seven are safe for the moment, in case the teleport doesn't work."

"Make Mike do it," Sonya said.

"Make Jonah do it," Mike said.

Jonah coughed.

"I'll do it," Adam said irritably, getting up to his feet and going to the laptop. "Peter, any luck with the next residential raiding plans?"

Peter shook his head, not looking up from the mass of papers before him.

"Here's something," Mike announced, "a list of ghost sites that they're using to send cloned transmissions to City 12."

"Good," Adam said approvingly. "Crack it."

"Sonya?"

"Do it yourself!" she snapped.

"You're the tech wizard," Mike muttered playfully.

"I swear Michael, do it, or I'm going to â€œ"

Adrian watched them argue with a slightly bemused expression. Jill was lounging next to him on the couch, curled up like a cat with her coffee mug dangling precariously from her slim fingers. The dark liquid was sloping dangerously.

"Isn't there anything I can do to help?" Adrian asked her. Jill looked up at him with her green eyes. "You could see if my dad needs any help prepping for leave," she suggested. Glad at the opportunity for action, Adrian got to his feet and headed down the hallway where Ken had departed, smiling slightly as he listened to Sonya and Michael's bickering. They were like little kids.

In the bedroom, Ken was poring through stacks of equipment, pulling large bundles of bulky clothes and stacks of notebooks from the drawers of a mahogany dresser. He looked up as Adrian entered the room.

"Do you need something?" Ken asked, tossing the clothes onto the bed and beginning to unfold them. Adrian shook his head. "I was wondering if you needed help with something. I don't really have anything to do at the moment."

Ken nodded. "Very well. We're going to be leaving for Dr. Kleiner's lab very soon â€" he's a doctor that's working with the Resistance in transporting citizens to a safer facility, Black Mesa East."

Adrian gave an involuntary twitch.

"Is something wrong?" Ken said, watching him closely. Adrian shook his head. "No. Nothing." He realized Jill must not have told her father that he had been involved in the Black Mesa Incident. And he wasn't up to explaining it now.

"So, we're heading to this Kleiner guy's place," Adrian prompted, after a short silence.

"Yes. If all goes well we should get there in two hours. From there, we can use his teleportation device to travel to Black Mesa East. We'll regroup there and consider our next plan of action. Hopefully, we'll establish contact with our undercover CP officers as well."

Ken unfolded a grey pair of jeans and to Adrian's surprise, a flash of steel met his eyes. "What â€" he started, but his voice quieted as Ken removed set the jeans aside, revealing a small, sleek, compact pistol.

"We've managed to salvage weapons from botched raids by the Combine, as well as having our undercover agents steal from the CP stores," Ken explained. "If we don't have weapons we're useless. Have you ever used a gun before?"

"Yeah," Adrian replied after a moment's hesitation. He didn't know how Ken would react to the knowledge that he had been involved in the Black Mesa Incident, but he could hardly keep it secret forever â€" Jill would probably mention it to her father after she regained some of her energy.

"You have experience?" Ken asked.

"I was in the army."

"Interesting," Ken said. He picked up the pistol and tossed it at him without warning. Adrian caught it deftly, slipping his finger around the trigger guard and twirling it into position. The gun felt natural in his hand, fitting into the callused grooves in his palms in all the right ways. He felt a surge of life flow back into him. This was where he belonged, with a gun in his hand and an enemy to fight.

Ken watched him without expression. "You must have had some training," he said, unrolling a large blue sweater that was masking a large black case. He unlocked it and sprung it open. Adrian glanced inside, taking in the disassembled weapon.

"Snipers, too?" He reached down and brushed the cold metal. "How do you guys get your hands on stuff this good?"

Ken gave a short laugh. "On the contrary, these weapons are considered relics now. Snipers such as this aren't even in circulation any more. The Combine have worked their twisted 'charm' into most of Earth's weaponry to convert it to things they can use more easily."

Adrian looked up. "What do you mean?"

"That's how the Combine operate, Shephard. They modify, they alter, they destroy. They capture humans at their prison facility and convert them to soulless husks, who then become part of the Overwatch Infantry. They convert our homes, our weapons, our people, our food. Everything on Earth is under their control."

Adrian's fingers tightened around the barrel of the handgun. "I want to fight with you," he said fiercely. "I want to kill those bastards. Every last one of them."

Ken gave a light smile, one devoid of any form of happiness. "I admire your enthusiasm, kid. But it's not that simple."

The bulky man pulled a shotgun out of a drawer and began to place rounds into it. Adrian watched him. "You were in the army too, weren't you?" he asked on impulse. Ken whipped his head around to gaze at him sharply, and Adrian instantly regretted speaking. Silence stretched between them, until Ken turned away and resumed loading the gun.

"I was, once," he replied in such a low tone that Adrian barely heard him. "But that's a story for another time."

Adrian knew a dismissal when he heard one. Wordlessly he helped Ken assemble and unpack the weaponry, until the heavy tread of footsteps broke the silence.

"Sir, we've put up the link between here and Doctor â€" oh." Peter stuck his head into the room. It occurred to Adrian that it was the first time he had heard the Russian speak. His voice was deep and powerful, heavily accented. "I'll come back."

"Never mind, Peter," Ken said heavily. "I'll go speak with Kleiner and tell him we're about to move. If you would continue gathering our equipment, please."

"Yes, sir."

He stood aside as Ken left the room. Adrian shifted as Peter silently walked up beside him and began to gather Ken's notebooks in his hands. As he reached out, Adrian saw a strange symbol burned into his skin, as though he had been branded. It was grouping of triangles arranged in a round pattern, so that they formed a dark circle on his pale arm.

"What's that symbol mean?" Adrian asked, more to break the silence than anything else. Peter did not reply, but he immediately rolled his sleeves down to cover the mark. Adrian awkwardly placed an Ithaca 37 shotgun on the bedspread and turned to an MP5. The Russian was watching him out of the corner of his eye.

"Your name is Shephard?" The heavy voice came as a complete surprise to Adrian, who had not expected the Russian to speak. "Yes, that's right."

Peter nodded slightly, his dark eyes never leaving Adrian's. He felt a deep chill in his stomach and fought the urge to look away. "You haven't been around much, have you." It wasn't a question.

"No," he replied, turning away and ejecting the magazine from the MP5. "How long since you have been in active service?"

"Long enough," Adrian replied wryly. He reached for a full magazine on the bedside table.

"I knew your brother."

The magazine clattered to the floor.

Adrian turned slowly, fully focusing on Peter for the first time. "What did you say?" The Russian nodded, only once. "He was a good man."

Adrian felt nettled. What was this guy's problem?

He waited for Peter to speak again, but the Russian seemed to have said all he intended to. He leaned over, stacking some notebooks in a pile and pulling a rag out of his pocket to clean the slide of a handgun. His muscles tensed as he worked.

Adrian was at a loss for words, something that didn't happen to him much. He almost opened his mouth to further interrogate the Russian, but he changed his mind. There would be time for that later. But something in Peter's voice had put him on edge.

They worked until the weapons were cleaned and the notebooks were packed in piles. Then Peter was on his feet, heading out of the room without another word. Adrian stood there in silence, listening to his breathing and the patter of rain on the windows of the empty room.

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"Wow, he's so talkative now," Alyx said in surprise, watching Gordon and Dr. Kleiner animatedly discussing the teleporter as Gordon adjusted something with a multi-purpose tool.

"He likes math," Barney shrugged from his position by the monitors. "And physics. Can't tell you why. Those subjects were the death of me."

Suddenly Dr. Kleiner straightened up from his position beneath a large circular platform, wiping his forehead on his sleeve. "All done!" he announced. "She's ready for a test."

"You're sure?" Barney said cryptically. "Because I still have nightmares about that cat."

"What cat?" Alyx asked in trepidation, but Kleiner waved her off. "Not to worry. We've made major strides since then. Major strides."

"But â€"

"Either way, Doc, you should get him out of his civvies," Barney said, motioning to Gordon with one hand, who pushed his glasses up on his nose with his index finger. "We've got to move fast."

"Okay," Dr. Kleiner said, and at that moment one of the computers let out a shrill beep. "Barney, can you deal with the suit please, I'm getting a call from one of the sparrows," Kleiner called, and he moved over to the console.

"Right, fine, but I've got to get back on my shift ASAP," Barney said, walking over to a large garage door next to the storage room that Gordon had failed to notice until now. He keyed a sequence of numbers into a small pad next to the door, and with a loud grinding noise, the large silver door rolled upward, revealing a large glass case, and inside it...

"No way!" Gordon said in wonder, walking forward and running his hand along the case, inside of which, gleaming and perfect, was his Hazard Suit. Barney walked up next to him. "Pretty sweet, eh? Dr. Kleiner's made a couple modifications, but it should function about the same."

Gordon nodded. Barney moved into the darkness of the room, feeling around on the wall for a light switch. "Here, let me â€"

Suddenly a loud shriek split the air, and a dark shadow launched itself from the rafters of the ceiling and latched onto Barney's head. He shouted in alarm and flailed backward, into the lighted room, bumping into a stack of cartons and sending them cascading to the floor. As he moved into the light, Gordon saw with a lurch in his stomach what had attacked him: a headcrab.

"Get it off me!" Barney howled, and Gordon seized a large wrench from the tabletop, slamming it down onto the headcrab's slimy back. Barney let out a terrific curse as the wrench hit the top of his head.

"Gordon, holy shit!" he roared. Both Alyx and Dr. Kleiner looked over at the commotion. "Oh, Lamarr, there you are!" Dr. Kleiner exclaimed.

"That thing is your pet?" Gordon asked dubiously, as Barney roared and stomped around the room, his fingers digging into the headcrab. "Damn it, Doc!" he bellowed, now attempting to smash his head against

the walls. Alyx was paralyzed with laughter, leaning against the wall for support. Gordon watched the spectacle with growing confusion and bemusement.

"Here, my pet, hop up," Dr. Kleiner said, tapping his bald head with one hand. The headcrab detached itself from Barney's head and leaped, not towards Kleiner, but into a vent shaft hanging above the storage area. A loud crash sounded as a multitude of silver instruments fell to the floor. "Fie!" Dr. Kleiner said vehemently. "It'll be a week before I can coax her out of there."

"Longer if we're lucky," Barney grumbled, wincing as he gingerly probed the large bump Gordon's wrench had left on his head. Gordon looked at the doctor. "Aren't they -?" he started, but Kleiner shook his head. "No, this one is de-beaked and completely harmless."

Gordon had half a mind to tell Dr. Kleiner that the headcrab seemed far from harmless, but he kept the sentiment to himself.

"Well, Gordon," Dr. Kleiner said, shaking him out of his reverie. "Go ahead and slip into your suit. That transmission was from Ken Townshend, another of the Resistance leaders. They're heading down here shortly to transfer to Eli's lab."

Gordon nodded and headed into the dark garage to slip out of his civilian clothing. As he slipped his arms into the sleeves of the HEV Suit, he felt as though he had come home again.

"Lookin' good," Alyx said, nodding as Gordon came back into the light, the HEV Suit shining in the brightness. It felt the same as he remembered. "Fits like a glove," Dr. Kleiner noted. "It's a Mark V now, upgraded from a Mark IV. It should â€" he was cut off by a loud, Klaxon-like alarm sounding in the background.

"Shit," Barney muttered. The atmosphere in the room changed from relaxed to tense. "We don't have time for this. We have to move, now."

"Good idea," Alyx said. "Get the suit juiced up, Gordon."

"There's a charger on the wall," Dr. Kleiner said, pointing to a strange rectangular orange-black box by the teleporter. "I've modified the suit to draw power from Combine energy outlets, which are plentiful wherever they patrol."

Gordon saw a strange plug-like device on the right shoulder of his suit. There was also a projecting device of metal protruding from the box that looked as though it fit into his suit's slot. He plugged it into the suit, and suddenly a bright stream of energy was being pumped through the box in the wall into his suit through the outlet. The HEV Suit glowed briefly before returning to normal.

"Good job," Dr. Kleiner said. He motioned them through the doorway to the teleporter. "Alyx, you position yourself on the main platform. The guard rails will close behind you to keep subject matter in one place."

"Was that statement supposed to sound so creepy?" Alyx asked, walking onto the platform. "Gordon, you position yourself by that panel over

there and activate the switch when the quantum transfer level maximizes," Dr. Kleiner called. Gordon nodded and moved over to the console in question, tweaking a dial, and two bright lines of energy sparked within the bottom of the platform.

Meanwhile, Dr. Kleiner had positioned himself before a large viewscreen, which was flickering static. After he fiddled with a small knob, the static cleared and a man's face appeared on the screen.

"Isaac, are you there?"

"Yes, Eli, a bit of a hold up on this end," Dr. Kleiner replied, adjusting the dial again. "You'll never guess who wandered into our lab this morning." Gordon peered at the screen and felt another surge of recognition and joy upon seeing his old friend, Eli Vance.

"Gordon, is that you?" Eli said, in a surprised and delighted tone. Gordon nodded, grinning. Dr. Kleiner glanced over at him. "We're going to send him and Alyx through now. Ken and his team are on the way, so they'll be arriving in about two hours or so."

"We're all set on this end," Eli said, nodding. In the background on the screen, Gordon could see a woman with dark brown hair and a bright yellow sweater, as well as a scaly green Vortigaunt. He felt a sharp surge of apprehension and dislike. He opened his mouth to ask what the hell the thing was doing next to Eli, but then the guard rails were closing around Alyx's slim form, and Gordon fell quiet.

The machine began to whir loudly, and Dr. Kleiner shouted over the noise. "The mass-less field flux should self-limit, and I've clamped the manifold parameters to include a GC orbit fold inclusive."

"Right," Gordon called back over the noise. Barney shook his head. "Conditions could hardly be more ideal," Kleiner continued.

"That's what you said last time," Barney muttered under his breath.

"Uh, listen," Alyx began, "about that cat..."

"Ready!" Dr. Kleiner shouted. "Gordon, throw the switch!"

He did.

There was a brilliant surge of blue light from the platform as the guard rails spun so fast they became a silver blur. Alyx's form wavered unsteadily, surrounded by sparkling blue lightning, as though the light was refracting off her body and distorting her image.

"Final sequence commencing now," Dr. Kleiner said.

"I can't look," Barney replied quietly. "Uh," Alyx called, her voice unsteady. "Okay... I, oh, God, it's â€"

There was a blinding flash of blue light and she vanished.

"Cool," Gordon said.

"Holy shit, Doc," Barney said, looking up at the spinning guard rails as they began to slow down. "It worked."

"Always the tone of surprise," Dr. Kleiner said grumpily. Suddenly, Alyx's face popped onto the viewing screen, next to Eli. "Hey doc!" she called, grinning, as she kissed Eli on the cheek.

"Good work, Izzy," Eli said from the screen. "Gordon."

He inclined his head. "We're going to send you through, now. Step into the test chamber," Eli called. Gordon nodded and walked through, turning to face the others as the machine began to hum again.

"See you in a few moments, Gordon," Eli said. The guard rails began their slow spin-up cycle again.

"So this is it, man," Barney said, putting his hands on his hips as the platform raised into the air.

"You're not coming?" Gordon asked him. Barney shook his head. "Somebody's got to keep the fuzz from getting stirred up. By the way, good work throwing that switch and all. I can see your M.I.T. education really pays off."

Gordon's lips twitched and he flipped him the bird. Barney laughed. "See you when I see you, yeah?"

"Yeah," Gordon replied. The rails were spinning too fast to follow now. It made him dizzy to try it. "Don't forget about that beer," he reminded, as the blue light began to fill the area around him.

The Klaxon alarm sounded again, and Barney cast a worried look at the doorway. "Gotta keep this moving," he muttered. He moved up beside the switch, resting his arm on it. "Doc, we ready?"

"Ready and fully enabled," Dr. Kleiner said, fingers moving furiously over a keyboard.

"Good luck out there, Gordon," Barney said. He nodded.

The blue light was incredibly bright now. He shut his eyes tightly but the glow penetrated his eyelids, scorching him thoroughly.

"We're ready to project you, Gordon. Best of luck in your future endeavours!" Dr. Kleiner called, and Barney threw the switch. "Bon voyage!"

The light burst. Everything was spinning fast, so fast he could only see blue. "Final sequence," Dr. Kleiner called over the roar of the teleporter, and then "â€"

"Holy shit!" Barney cried, as something small and fast jumped out of a ventilation shaft, landing on the teleporter wires and disconnecting them. There was a brilliant flash of sparks, and the blue light flickered and turned deep violet.

"What the hell is that?" Alyx cried from the other end. "It's the freaking head humper!" Barney yelled, and Gordon, sick to his stomach and somewhat amused, saw the headcrab Lamarr scuttling across the floor near the disconnected wires â€"

"Hedy, Lamarr, _no â€_"

The creature leaped directly at the teleporter, aiming for Gordon's face.

The world exploded. Everything turned white.

He heard the others calling to him; they sounded far away.

6. Bid for Freedom

The lights flashing around him were so bright they seemed to have lit themselves in his brain. He could hear a strange rushing noise in his ears, almost like running water, mixed with a jumble of confused voices and panicked shouts, that echoed faintly in his ears through the throbbing hum that cascaded inside his mind.

"Gordon,_ Gordon â€_"

He opened his eyes; amidst a whirling cloud of indigo and yellow and fuchsia lights, he saw at once that the lab had vanished. Something was wrong with the teleport â€" _harmonic reflux, maybe? Â—he thought wildly â€" and he had somehow been transported to a different destination. Stretching out before him was a vast plateau of sand, with littered bits of metal and junk marring its surface. A loud cawing noise, uncomfortably close to his ear, told him that a flock of crows was flapping wildly about his head. Through the pain and brightness he peered into the air, and saw a flash of blurry black feathers. In the distance, the sand met a thick, wide ocean in a flat, dreadful line. The blackness of it stretched out to infinity, and he was vaguely aware of a headcrab leaping away from him among the sand â€"

"He's back!"

"Is Lamarr with him?"

"Forget about that thing!"

All around him, a mix of confusion and silver steel and a bright blue light beam â€" he was back at Dr. Kleiner's. Barney was shouting something to him, but he seemed to be growing farther and farther away as the light intensified â€"

"Dad, there he is! What's happening?"

"I'm not sure. Judith?"

Through the thick blue screen of light, Alyx's worried face. Eli was next to her, fading in and out of focus. Bside him was a woman â€" a woman in dark pants and a sweater of a nondescript shade of yellow â€" who was speaking, it seemed. Why was her voice so dim?

"I'm not sure, it seems to be some kind of interference â€"

You don't say, Gordon thought sarcastically, but then with a frightening lurch he was drawn away, and in a split second he was somewhere else. This place, he was certain, he had never seen before. It appeared to be some sort of office â€" mahogany desk, hardwood floors â€" but it wasn't empty. A man sat at the desk, poring over papers â€" an old man, with a thick white moustache and beard, and startlingly green eyes â€"

"What is the meaning of this?" Wallace Breen demanded suddenly, through the gloom. "Who are you? How did you get in here?"

Behind him was a huge computer screen, and a series of consoles. Next to the computer was a window â€" a window that overlooked an entire city, a bleak grey metropolis. Where was he?

"Listen, you â€"

Another bright flash and he was gone again; this time, when he opened his eyes, he was back at Dr. Kleiner's. His stomach was twisting funnily, and Gordon realized with a jolt that if he remained in this field flux any longer, he would be peeled apart by the masses of quantum transfer.

"He's back!" Barney yelled, although it was a quiet yell. "I'm getting him out of there!" he charged at the whirling guard rails, but Dr. Kleiner's voice suddenly rang out:

"You can't wade into the field, it will peel you apart!" Barney stopped, reluctantly, and Gordon felt that sudden wrench in his stomach as Barney shouted, "don't worry Gordon, we'll â€"

Back to Eli's, it seemed. "There he is again!" Alyx cried. "We just lost Gordon, what's going on?" Barney yelled from the viewing screen on the desk, that was shimmering crazily in the blue light.

"I'm not sure," Eli called back, "we're encountering some unexpected interference!"

Flash.

Back to the office in the tower. Breen was standing before the viewscreens, which were no longer black and empty, but all of them filled with the image of a thick, green, wormlike thing. Gordon caught a glimpse of a flash of metal, and then â€"

"The man I saw," Breen was saying rapidly, "I'm all but certain it wasâ€|" he turned, and for a split second he and Gordon stared right at each other. He felt a sickening jolt again as realization, terrible realization, sparked in Breen's eyes.

"Gordon Freeman," he finished in a whisper, and then everything imploded again â€"

Everything was dark, and freezing cold. Where was he? Even amidst the flickering blue teleport light, he could see nothing but a thick black mass all around him. He tried to draw breath, and suddenly choked on a mouthful of something cold and wet that set his lungs aflame. He was underwater.

And there, in the darkness, something was coming right at him—he saw a thick dark shape, bristling with sharp, sickle-like claws, and dagger-like teeth, looming out of the blackness, some sort of mutated fish, its jaws wide and gaping to claim him as its own

and then, with another bright flash, he was free, and he could breathe again. The sharp air stung his face and throat as he gulped it down gratefully. The air was cold, he was not inside. He looked through the haze and saw a bright blue thing inside a window

He was outside Dr. Kleiner's.

"What do you mean, he's not there?" Isaac was yelling into the screen.

"He didn't come through!" Eli replied loudly.

"Then where is he?" Kleiner asked. Suddenly, through the screen, Eli caught sight of him outside the window. "Behind you!" he said quickly. "Shut it down, shut it down!"

Right as Gordon felt the horrible jerking in his navel, Dr. Kleiner frantically hit some buttons on his console, and the light at the corner of his eyes flared out of existence. He fell with a loud, wet thud on the metal catwalk, shivering in the freezing air. He attempted to move, before his stomach twisted wildly and he unearthed a spray of vomit that began to drip from the edge of the balcony.

"Gordon, run!" Dr. Kleiner was calling through the blinds. "You have to get out of here!"

"Keep out of sight," Barney roared as he sprinted across the room towards the door. "I'll come find you!"

Then the blinds were yanked closed and he was alone on the balcony, shivering in a pile of water and his own stomach fluids.

Ugh—

Gordon stumbled to his feet, and experienced such a powerful wave of nausea that he promptly threw up again, this time spraying it directly at the wall next to the window. Grimly, he wiped his mouth with a shaking hand, stumbling like a drunk toward the stairs at the end of the catwalk, leading to the ground.

He appeared to be inside a large fenced area, with large industrial generators and water tanks looming high around him in the sunlight. The fence was trashed and bent a little way past the largest generator, so Gordon made his way over there. Apart from his gait being a bit unsteady, the effects of the teleport malfunction were quickly wearing off. His only complaint, apart from his trembling legs, was that he was freezing.

Past the fence, there were a large number of wooden crates stacked by a doorway, which was ajar. Gordon stealthily crept through the doorway and down the hallway within, leaving faintly wet footprints behind. Eventually he came to another door, this one leading back outside.

As he pushed the door open and the cold wind bit into his cheeks, Gordon saw that he was on the roof of a building overlooking a large train depot. Creeping forward, Gordon noticed several of the strange floating scanners floating over the unused trains. In addition " he noticed this with a creeping sense of trepidation " several of the Civil Protection metro police were patrolling the depot, pistols in their hands.

"Gordon!"

Turning around sharply, Gordon saw Barney push his way out of a door on a catwalk of another building to his right. He ran to the edge of the roof.

"I don't know what you did Gordon, but the Citadel's on full alert," Barney told him, casting an apprehensive glance towards the huge black spire towering in the centre of the city. "I've never seen it lit up like that!"

Gordon turned to watch it, and at that moment became aware that hundreds " maybe even thousands! " of tiny black dots were being shot out of its sides. _Shit._

"You've got to get out of City 17 as fast as you can, Gordon," Barney said urgently, drawing his attention once more. "You can't afford to be caught here. Take the old canals, alright? If you follow them, they'll take you to Eli's lab. It's a dangerous route, but there's a whole network of refugees working the Underground Railroad, and they'll help you if you meet them. I'd come with you, but I've got to look after Dr. Kleiner."

Gordon nodded grimly, ducking down low as a party of scanners flew overhead, like a seething black thunderhead. After they passed, he straightened up.

"Oh, and before I forget," Barney said, pulling something from behind his back, "I think you dropped this back in Black Mesa."

He tossed a long metal object towards Gordon; it clattered noisily onto the rooftop. "Good luck out there, buddy. You're gonna need it."

He was gone before Gordon could reply. For a while he stood and watched the catwalk where Barney had disappeared, before snapping to his senses. He walked over to the object Barney had thrown at him, and saw at a closer glance that it was a crowbar " the very same crowbar he had found and used back in Black Mesa. He ran his gloved fingers reverently over its smooth, cold surface. The tip and end of the crowbar were bright silver, but the length of its shaft was rust red. It's jagged, two-pronged tip, had it not been stainless steel, would have become permanently stained with blood throughout the time he had used it.

A bleak smile stretched across his face, and he loped off toward the edge of the roof, ready to make a bid for safety.

x x x x

"All right, we're packed and ready," Adam announced to the group at

large. Adrian, who had been brooding silently in a corner of the room for the past ten minutes, looked up in relief. He needed to do something, anything, to relieve the tension. Michael, Jonah and Sonya were at the tech station, dismantling their computers. Jill had packed the most important of their food supplies into several boxes, in case they had to hole up indefinitely on the trip to Kleiner's lab. Peter had laid all the weapons on a chair at the edge of the room, and was now standing, a hulking and shadowy figure, at the doorway where the hallway met the living room. He was outfitted with enough weapons to start a small war. An AK-47 assault rifle was slung over his shoulder, two gleaming .357 magnums were belted at his waist, and he had two long ammo belts slung across his chest like an X. A large abundance of grenades were also clipped to his belt.

"We've gone through most of the contents of the case â€" the rest is just plans for a new wing to add to Nova Prospekt," Adam was saying. "We've sent the latest news regarding air raids to Station 6, and we've notified Sector 29A that they're about to receive some unwelcome company. That's the extent of what we can do now."

"Good," Ken said approvingly, who was dousing the contents of the case in a small fireplace with a small bottle of alcohol. "Jonah, did you shut down all our assets?"

"Yeah," the dark-skinned African American replied, fingers a blur on the computer keyboard, as he smoked. "Any Combine comes up in here, this thing'll blow up right in their damn face."

"I never told you to rig it to explode," Ken said, annoyed. "What if someone from the Resistance comes back here?"

Jonah shrugged and took a hit from his joint, not looking overly concerned. Mike laughed.

"All right," Ken grunted. "We go regardless; we have no time to spare. Peter, as soon as we find a driveable vehicle, cover us while we hijack it. Mike, you're driving. Sonya, you take down the barriers as we go. Jonah and Adam, you cover Jill."

"I can take care of myself," she interrupted, eyes sparking. Ken shook his head. "We had a close enough call with you earlier. You stay under cover, let us handle this one. Adrian, can I count on you to guard her?"

"Sure," Adrian replied cautiously, wary of the mutinous expression on Jill's face. Ken nodded once. "Then let's go." There was a general flurry of activity as the group grabbed weapons, boxes, and containers, before filing out of the apartment. Peter led the way, crouching low, his AK at the ready. Michael followed, dressed in crisp black combat gear, a Franchi SPAS 12 shotgun clutched in his hands. Sonya and Adam followed as well, lugging boxes of equipment. Ken, before stumping out of the apartment, brought his fingers to Jonah's lips and flicked his joint right into the fireplace, where the torn paper from the writing case burst into flame. He then shunted Jonah out the doorway, ignoring his mutterings of "wasting" and "the importance of rationing." Jill fought back a smile and followed her father, but not before turning and shooting Adrian a sunny grin. His stomach twisted strangely.

"Ready to go?" she asked him. He nodded, eager and anxious all at once. "Yeah, let's do it!"

Jill smiled before running after the party as they moved down the stairs. Adrian readjusted his hold on the MP5 submachine gun Ken had given him and followed her down the stairwell.

He caught up with the others as they were clustered around the back door. Ken hefted the Ithaca 37 he was holding and motioned to the door. "Peter, you take point." The muscle-bound Russian nodded once before easing the door open and disappearing into the greyish light of day, AK at the ready. Adam transferred his box to Jill and pulled out a dual pair of 9mm pistols from his beltline before following Michael, Jonah and Sonya out the door, with Jill and Adrian bringing up the rear.

It was dully lit outside, and the sky stretched overhead like a drab grey curtain. Luckily, it had stopped raining. There were no patrols of metro cops in sight, and the back courtyard of the apartment building was deserted. Peter, some distance away, jerked his head toward an alleyway leading back towards the more populated streets, and began to hurry towards it, running while crouched over to avoid being seen. Jill, Jonah and Sonya followed, lugging their boxes, while Adam and Michael followed, sweeping the streets with their weaponry. Adrian crept after them, his heart hammering against his ribs.

As he reached the darkness of the alley, he heard the roar of a vehicle at the other end. Peter and Ken were hunched against the alley walls, hiding in the shadows of a large dumpster, the others slightly behind. Adrian crept up next to Ken and surveyed the street.

Two Combine APCs were running idle in the street, sending clouds of smoke up from their exhaust pipes. The armoured grey vans were stationed about twenty feet apart. Inside the glass dome at the top of each APC, a Civil Protection officer stood, swivelling a mounted turret gun around, watching the street. Another group of officers were forcing a group of about six citizens out of an apartment. As Adrian watched, one of the officers struck a man in the temple with the butt of his pistol, knocking him to the ground and laughing at the scream of his female companion, who dove to the ground next to him. The officer then kicked the woman over. Rage grew hot and fast in Adrian's stomach.

"We'll have to make separate bids for each APC," Ken whispered. "Peter, take out the guys at the turrets. You, Sonya, Mike, and Jonah will take one. Jill, Adrian, Adam and I will take the other. Sonya—" he looked at the tech worker, who gazed back at him with dark, steady eyes — "load your stuff, then power down those barriers at the end of the road."

"Okay, Chief," she said, hefting her box. "Adam, Mike," Ken said, turning to them next, "cover Jonah and Jill while they load the vans. Adrian, go for the driver of the car on the left. I'm going for the one on the right. Everyone clear?"

"Yeah," they chorused. Ken narrowed his eyes. "On three, then. One—two—"

As Ken yelled "three," they all burst from the shadows. Peter took aim and squeezed off several shots, which roared through the air, deafening. The officer at the turret of the left APC slumped over the side, blood pouring from holes in his chest. As the other CP at the turret whirled to meet him, Peter fired again, and the officer's head exploded in a cloud of red and white.

The civilians began screaming and running in different directions, panicked. The officers guarding them looked over, and immediately drew their pistols. One of them drew a small handheld radio. "Resistance fighters in Sector 7!" He roared. "We need backup!"

Adrian aimed at the man's left eye goggle and pulled the trigger of his MP5. The left side of the man's head burst and blood gushed wildly into the air.

"Look out!" Ken roared, and a split second later a volley of piercing gunshots rang out as the CPs returned fire. Adrian ducked as bullets whizzed over his head, punching small holes into buildings around him. Several windows shattered loudly.

At precisely the same moment, the drivers of the APCs threw their cars into gear. With loud roars, both armoured vehicles barreled down the street, taking it up completely, aiming right for them. One of the citizens, who was running away from the fire, was struck by one of the vans, and his body was thrown forwards before being crunched beneath its rolling, mammoth wheels.

Ken raised his shotgun and fired; the blast ripped a group of holes into the armoured vest of one Civil Protection officer, and he was thrown backwards with a loud scream. Michael shot another in the leg, and as the officer fell, convulsing, he finished him with another shot to the neck. However, the APCs were almost upon them, and there would be no way for any of them to avoid the blunt metal of their hoods.

Adam aimed his dual pistols and fired four times. Three of the shots bounced harmlessly off the armoured side of the van, but the last one went through the driver's slot and caught the officer in the neck. With a gurgle, the man fell out the side of his vehicle and slammed into the street in a pool of blood. The APC careened out of control and smashed into a lamppost.

"Sonya, Mike, get to the van!" Ken bellowed, diving behind a trash bin as the other APC screeched past, uncomfortably close, swerving in a circle to take another run at him. Two of the CP officers also complied with a rapid barrage of gunfire. Adrian and Peter unloaded into the officers attacking Ken, and they fell. Meanwhile, Sonya and Jonah were hurrying to the crashed APC, with Michael close behind, running backwards as he fired at the other officers.

As Adrian sighted another officer and fired, one of the CP officers rolled to the side, crouching behind a bench as he took potshots at Jill, who was crouched in the cover of another alley, guarding her box of equipment. A hole was punched in the wall less than an inch away from her face, and a flying chip of stone cut across her cheek. Feeling a stab of panic, Adrian aimed at the officer, but he needn't have worried. Jill swung herself out of the alley, holding a pistol in one hand, and with one quick shot the officer was down, missing

half his head. She winked at Adrian before grabbing her box, hefting it more securely under her arm, and making for the cover of the APC, pistol blazing.

Intensely relieved, Adrian swung the barrel of his submachine gun around, and saw with a jolt of alarm that three other APCs were rounding the street corner a long distance away and heading for them. To make matters worse, the first APC was swerving right towards him.

"Eat this, fucker," Adrian muttered under his breath. He took careful aim, ignoring the bullets searing past his head—

—and with one careful shot, took the driver's head off.

The APC swerved to a halt before him, the headless corpse slumped over in its seat, a brilliant tapestry of dripping red on the seat behind him. Adrian hurried towards the APC, kicking the driver out with one foot. The corpse fell to the pavement, staining the ground scarlet where its head used to be. Looking into the interior of the car made Adrian wince slightly — blood was plastered all over the driver's seat — but he turned around and yelled as loud as he could:

"Jill! Adam! Ken, get over here!"

Adam, who was engaged in a blazing firefight with a group of reinforcing officers pouring down the street, began to backpedal, his pistols going nonstop. Several of the officers running at them fell, but the majority kept running. Then, with a dry click, his pistols were empty.

"Shit," Adrian muttered, and he emptied the remainder of his clip into the oncoming horde, ignoring their screams and the splatters of blood that made the ground slippery. As his gun ran dry, he ejected his used up magazine and crammed another in, just as Jill pulled up beside him.

"You all right?" Adrian yelled over the roar of the gunfire. The APCs were closing fast; they had perhaps a minute before the drivers were on them.

"Great!" she yelled back, wrenching two double doors at the back of the APC open, revealing a sort of storage area, most likely for transporting troops. Jill shoved her box into the back of the van before clambering in. "Where's Dad and Adam? Dad!"

He looked over his shoulder; the scene could not have been worse. Although Jonah and Sonya had succeeded in loading the first APC, Ken and Adam were too far away from them to make it to their car without being gunned down. Adam seemed to have realized this, and was making sharp gestures to Adrian, yelling something indistinguishable over the roar of gunfire.

"He wants us to go without them," Adrian yelled to Jill. Her eyes widened. "No!" she said. "We can't leave them!"

"They'll go with Mike and Peter!" he said, clambering into the driver's seat of the APC, looking at the complex display of buttons and controls that surrounded the steering wheel. Through the absent

windshield he could see Peter clambering into the turret seat of the first APC, ripping bloody holes through the ranks of the Civil Protection officers. Ken and Adam had already disappeared into the troop compartment at the back of the APC, and Michael was gunning the engine. He shot them a worried look before starting to move down the street.

"Jill, they're safe, we've got to go!" Adrian said urgently. Jill relented and yanked the back doors of the APC shut, shielding them from gunfire. Adrian could hear the ping ping noise of bullets as they bounced off the metal exterior of the van. "How the hell do we start this thing?!"

"Michael taught me, move aside!" Jill cried, clambering over his lap and moving her fingers rapidly over the controls. "Shift over!" Adrian complied, moving to the passenger seat, as the engine suddenly roared. "We're out of here!" Jill exclaimed, and a split second later they shot down the street, following the bulky form of Michael's APC as it disappeared around a street corner.

"Fuck, they're right on top of us!" Adrian shouted, twisting around in his seat. The Civil Protection officers had fallen behind, but the three APCs were hot on their tail. The turret of one at the forefront suddenly swiveled, and a split second later bullets were ricocheting all around them.

"They'll shoot us down if we don't take them out!" Jill yelled, yanking the wheel and making a hard left; with a screech of tires that no doubt left tread marks in the asphalt, they rounded a corner and shot after Michael's APC. Adrian caught the briefest glimpse of the startled faces of CPs and citizens alike as they shot past.

"Take the turret!" Jill ordered as the gunfire increased; another of the APCs was close enough to fire at them. Adrian nodded, and without another word he clambered up into the dome at the roof of the APC, seizing a large Gatling gun that was connected to the vehicle and rotating it to face the oncoming APCs. The turret officers spotted him and aimed at him, and a split second later gunfire ricocheted off his vehicle, uncomfortably close to his body.

Good thing they're not great shots. Look at them, tossing bullets away like they're candy. Watch and learn, bitchesâ€¦

He took aim at officer at the turret of the closest APC and let it rip. The gun jerked wildly in his hands, emitting a steady stream of machine gun fire that tore through the officer and shredded his body into nothing. His upper body exploded and shreds of flesh went flying into the air, amidst a misty cloud of blood.

He aimed at the next turret and continued to fire, shattering the glass around the officer and ripping him in half with the force of his gunfire. The man's screaming torso fell to the pavement and rapidly receded into the distance.

"Good shooting!" Jill called from somewhere beneath him. "Hard right coming up, hang tight!"

Adrian opened his mouth to call his affirmative when the entire car wrenched to the side, slamming him into the side of the turret hole.

Biting back a curse, he shook his head to clear it and chanced a glance behind him. Michael's APC was streaking ahead, close by; Adrian could even discern Peter in the turret seat, bellowing something incoherent as his entire body vibrated with the force of his bucking turret. Another APC was approaching them from the east, but Peter's constant gunfire shredded the tires and sent the armoured van careening right into the side of a building. There was a colossal explosion, and a bright ball of fire blossomed in the already lengthening distance. As the plumes of smoke vanished behind them, Adrian decided to follow Peter's lead. He took aim at the first APC's tires and unleashed a steady barrage of gunfire.

As shell casings flew past his head in a constant stream, the front left tire of the oncoming APC exploded. The vehicle immediately began to swerve dangerously. The driver fought to get it under control, but as Adrian shot out the second front tire, the APC struck the curb and flipped over, skidding on its side and sending up a bright array of sparks before it crashed into a building and exploded.

"Great shot!" Jill called admiringly from below. Adrian whirled around, feeling a jolt as he saw what was approaching them. "Jill, it's one of those blue energy field gates!"

"Don't worry," Jill shouted up to him, "Sonya's disabling the Combine energy gates as we go! Just focus on taking out the last two APCs! We're coming up on the canals soon, we can't let them know where we're headed!"

"Gotcha!" Adrian yelled, riddling the front of the next closest APC with gunfire. The metal front dented inward with the force of the bullets, until, entirely by chance, one of Adrian's caught the driver in the head. He saw a brief flare of red and pink as the man's head exploded, before the APC crashed into a building with a shriek of metal and was buried in collapsing rubble.

"Only one more!" Adrian called. He took aim again as Jill swerved around another corner. They were close to the canals now; Adrian could see the snaking waterways branching out before them. Michael's APC flew off the side of the road and landed with a tremendous splash in the low water, where it churned away and out of sight.

"We've got to follow them!" Jill cried. "Adrian, take that car out now!"

He aimed, but right as he did, the last APC's turret officer fired at him. To Adrian's horror, one of the van's back tires was blown open. The APC began to rock crazily as more bullets rammed into the vehicle.

"Shit, I'm losing control!" Jill cried, her hands white as she fought to keep the vehicle steady. Adrian tried to get a clear shot at the officer, but the vehicle was rocking so much he couldn't get a fix.

Another one of their tires blew out just as the APC flew off the edge of the canal and landed in the waterway. The APC tilted wildly and flipped onto its right side. Adrian heard Jill scream as they slammed against the water, and out of desperation he fired erratically from his sideways position at the rapidly approaching personnel carrier.

For a change, he got lucky. One of his shot's pierced the driver, and the APC flew into the side of the canal and burst into flame. However, before Adrian could enjoy their victory, their own car, sparks and water spraying from underneath as it skidded on its side, flew right in to a canal tunnel with an earthshaking crash.

x x x x

His head hurt. Everything around him was dark, cold, and wet. Groaning, he tried to sit up, but a sharp pain flared in his right temple and he fell back, coughing. He felt a small trickle of blood seep down the corner of his mouth.

Everything was somewhat blurry and distorted. What had happened? There had been commotion in the alleyway, then some sort of gunfight â€œ

The chase! They had crashed!

"Jill?" Adrian whispered hoarsely, casting his eyes around wildly. As his vision cleared, he realized that they were inside a tunnel in the wall of the canal. The crumpled ruins of the APC were blocking the tunnel entrance, and very little light was creeping through. He must have been thrown from the turret seat. As he looked at the burning remains of the APC, he felt a stab of panic. What if Jill was still inside?

He limped over to the burning wreckage, ignoring the searing pain in his head, but the interior of the van was totaled. And empty. Slightly relieved, but not much, he turned around, and raked the tunnel with his eyes. In the flickering light of the fire he could see an immobile figure lying face up in the water.

"Jill!"

Worried, he scrambled over to her, kneeling at her side and brushing a strand of wet auburn hair away from her pale face. Her breathing was strong and regular. She appeared unhurt. "Jill, are you okay?"

He cupped her face with one hand. Jill gave a soft moan and stirred feebly under his touch. "Unnhâ€œ|" she slowly opened her eyes, and Adrian felt a rush of relief as her bright emerald orbs seared into him. "Adrian? What happened? How did we â€œ" she suddenly sat bolt upright. "We crashed! Are you okay?"

"Of course," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "And don't move so quickly, you might have broken something. Are you all right?"

"I think so," Jill replied, running experimental hands over her body, pressing down every here and there. "Yeah, I just banged up my knee a little bit." She started to get to her feet, when she winced and sucked in a breath.

"Jill?" Adrian asked, sensing her pain and hastening to her side to hold her up. "What's wrong?"

"I think I screwed up my already screwed up ankle," she muttered angrily. "God damn it!"

"Does it hurt badly?"

Jill shook her head vehemently. "No. I can still walk on it â€" she took a few steps forward, biting back a groan as she put weight on her ankle, which trembled. "Jill," Adrian stated worryingly, moving towards her, "you shouldn't â€"

"I can still walk," she insisted, not wanting to show any weakness â€" or to slow him down. "I'm fine, honest. We should â€" Adrian, you're bleeding!"

"Huh?" he reached up with one hand and felt the right side of his head, where, to be sure, hot sticky blood met his fingers. He probed the cut on the side of his head gingerly, wincing as he touched it. Luckily, the wound wasn't too deep. It probably looked a lot worse than it was. "It's nothing, just a scratch."

"Your head doesn't hurt?"

It did, actually, but not enough to be worth mentioning. He shook the pain off and took a step towards Jill. "No, I'm fine. Do you know where we are?"

Jill looked around, and her face fell. "A lot further away from Kleiner's lab than I had hoped," she replied. "We'll have to make our way there through the canals. Luckily, the Underground Railroad can help us along â€" if we can find them."

"What's â€"

"System of refugees," Jill answered immediately, smiling at him. Adrian grinned back sheepishly. "'Kay. Sorry."

"No problem," Jill murmured as she looked around the tunnel. "We lost the others, though. I hope they made it all right."

Adrian thought of the other Resistance members for the first time, and he felt a sense of foreboding creep up his spine. "Don't worry about them. They'll be fine, your dad knows what he's doing. And they have Peter, and Adam, and â€" they'll be fine."

Jill nodded, her eyes doubtful, but she shook her head to clear it. "Then we should probably get going and find Kleiner's place."

"Okay," Adrian agreed, touching his waist and feeling pleasantly surprised when he found the SMG still belted to his hip. He pulled it out and held it securely before him. "I'll go first. Stay behind me, okay? And hold my arm to make sure you don't fall."

"Really, I can do it," Jill protested, but when she moved forward, she faltered and bit back a groan. "Jill," Adrian said. She rolled her eyes. "Fine, fine." She grabbed onto his bicep, pulling a pistol from her belt with the other hand. "Lead the way."

Adrian nodded, and together they set out into the darkness of the tunnel, through the old canals.

_A/N: Just in case I never mentioned this, more reviews mean faster

updates. I can't really continue if I don't get any feedback. _

7. The Beginnings of Destiny

A loud droning whine pierced the air above him, and Gordon shrank back into the shadows of the building to his right, the crowbar clutched tightly in his gloved fist. That damn scanner hadn't moved for the past five minutes " and there was no way he could venture across the train yard with it hovering there. From his perspective in the shadows, he could see three Civil Protection officers moving along the tracks, handguns out. Two were moving away from him, but one was slowly and steadily approaching his general position. If he didn't move soon, he would be discovered.

He caught a flash of black and white some point to his left, and he ducked further into the concealing darkness, his teeth gritted. He had only seen it for a second, but there was no mistaking those pale masks. Another of the damn metro cops was out there. Gordon stealthily crept sideways in the shadows, looking fruitlessly for a way to dart from the shadows of the building across the train yard. One of the metro cops stopped for a second, his back to Gordon. He began to creep forward stealthily, the crowbar raised next to his head, as he gradually drew up behind the metro cop, who was muttering into a walkie talkie.

"_E-592 reporting in. Still no sign of Anticitizen. Combing Sector 4, over."_

"_Roger that, E-592. Units in your area are to move to Sector 9 upon check completion."_

"_Affirmative."_

The Civil Protection officer clipped the radio back to his belt and began to move off, away from Gordon. This was his chance. With several quick, fast steps, he moved in behind the officer and swung the crowbar downward with all his might.

The two pronged tip slammed into the top of the man's skull. There was a sickening _crunch_ and a soft pulping noise as bone cracked and flesh ripped, and the officer crumpled with a soft groan, his body as limp and flaccid as a sack of potatoes. Wasting no time, Gordon dragged the immobile body into the shadows, crouching down on his haunches to make sure the officer was still alive. He was, but the man's breathing was coarse and erratic, and blood bubbled at the hole in the top of his white mask. For a split second, Gordon considered setting the man's radio off so that someone would find him. At least then he wouldn't die" |

But it's him or you. You set the alarm, and this officer lives. But they'll find you, and they'll kill you in a heartbeat.

Gordon stood abruptly. He could not afford pity. He could not afford it back at Black Mesa, and he could not afford it now, in this dark, grey apocalyptic place the world had become. Those who fight, win. Those who hesitate, lose.

Screeeeeeeech" |

The scanner darted away into the shadows of another building. The way across the train yard was momentarily clear.

Go!

Gordon bolted out of the shadows, running as quickly yet as softly as he could, crouched low so as to prevent the metro cops from seeing him. There was no shouting, no blare of gunshots. Gordon ran, his boots crunching on the gravel beneath his feet, and then he was at the first train, a hulking, rust-red snake, stationary on the glistening tracks. Multiple compartments stretched before him, most of them closed up. His eyes roved desperately across the train, searchingâ€¦

There! He darted forward, leaping toward the blackness that was an open compartment door. He landed with a metallic _thud_ in the midst of a huge pile of wooden crates. They were nailed shut. The words "Biotic Specimens, Class 4" were stamped across the top of each box in blood red ink.

Gordon neither knew nor cared what Class 4 Biotic Specimens were. He cared about whether any Civil Protection officers had heard the noise he had made when landing inside the train. Quickly, he shuffled through the shadowed compartment, looking for the exit door. When he found it, he tugged at its handle with his gloves, and with a grating shriek, the door opened and light flooded in, blinding him.

Movement to his left, blurry in the sudden light. Gravel crunching under metallic boots. He looked up; multiple black dots were converging on his location.

Shit.

"Hey, you!"

Gordon whipped his head around; a tall, masked figure was running toward him from dozens of yards away. "Stop!"

Gordon ran.

"I've got him! _I see him! Anticitizen in Sector 4, need backup!"_

Suddenly gravel was crunching all around him as the pounding of feet resonated throughout the train yard. One of the scanners flew dangerously close to his head; he swiped at it with the crowbar, and the thing exploded in a shower of sparks. Up ahead was another train, this one grey. He ran in between the two metal monsters, their bulk pressing in on him. Gordon spared a glance back as he ran; CPs were flooding the space between the two trains in a seething mass. Up ahead was another open compartment door. He ran toward it.

Blam blam blam

Suddenly loud gunshots pierced the air and the gravel around his feet shot upward in huge wisps of grey. One stray shot whizzed by his ear, deafening him temporarily. It struck the train and ricocheted off with a loud _ping_. Gordon dove into the open compartment, immediately looking for an exit. Loud, angry voices were reverberating all around him. He couldn't see the door, too dark â€¦

but there was an open panel on the ceiling, leading to the roof of the train. Several boxes were stacked next to it.

Gordon was about to make a run for it when suddenly a shadow blocked the light from the open door. He whirled around, and a Civil Protection officer was in the doorway, stun baton at the ready. His eye goggles gleamed dangerously as the baton burst to blue, flickering life.

Gordon didn't think; he reacted. Before the officer could move he ran forward and stabbed the sharp end of the crowbar into the man's chest. It punctured the vest with a loud rip, and the man screamed in agony as blood burst from around the cold steel. Gordon brought his foot up and kicked the man away, dislodging his body from the crowbar. The bleeding form fell out of the doorway, convulsing.

Gordon leaped at the boxes and scaled them quickly. As he reached the opening and placed his hands on the hard roof of the train, two more CPs appeared in the compartment doorway. They levelled their guns and fired just as he swung his body out of the hole and hauled his legs up after him.

The gunshots bounced off the steel wall, uncomfortably close. Gordon sprang to his feet and kicked the open flap, sending it clanging shut loudly. He then began to sprint down the length of the train, heading for the edge of the depot. All around him, Civil Protection officers had gathered like maggots to a fresh carcass. He felt a stab of alarm. So many had come, and so quickly too " he couldn't even count them. Was he really wanted that badly?

The officers on the ground spotted his orange, loping form in the Hazard Suit and apparently decided they wanted him dead over escaped. In a split second, more than a dozen pistols were pointed at him and then a thunderstorm erupted around his head as bullets rampaged through the air.

Gordon ducked over as he ran, feeling the sharp pounding of his heart as bullets ricocheted off the train. Sparks burst near his feet as bullets drove into the harsh steel.

"He's getting away!"

"Quick, shoot him!"

"Aim for his legs, we can still take him alive!"

Like hell you can, Gordon thought. Up ahead, no more than ten yards away, on the other side of the train next to him, was a fenced in grassy enclosure and an open door that looked like it led to a maintenance or sewer passage. _That must be a way to the canals!_ He put on a burst of speed, ignoring the bullets roaring all around him. He activated the Hazard Suit's long jump module, and then he gathered his courage and leaped into the air.

For a second he was suspended, weightless, in midair, and then he had bypassed the space between the trains. He landed with a jarring thud that rippled through his feet and coursed upward until he felt the shock of landing vibrate his teeth. He didn't slow down, but instead used the momentum of his first leap to jump again, farther this time.

Then two things happened simultaneously. The first was that he cleared the fence surrounding the maintenance entrance. The second was that something small and hot suddenly drove into the back of his left leg. A sharp flare of pain bit through him and he yelped, twisting in midair and landing hard on the grass with a loud _thump_. His shoulder was the first thing to hit the ground, and he felt something wrench in his shoulder as the ground slammed into him. A split second later he felt sharp, agonizing pain drive through him. A cloud of dust fluttered around him as he rolled over, cursing.

"_Warning. Minor muscle strain detected. Minor laceration detected. Morphine administered."_

Gordon let his breath out in a long hiss as the pain slowly faded from his shoulder, and then from his leg. The on-board computer system within the suit indicated through his HUD that his health and vitals were all right. Gordon sat up, shaky and disoriented. He would have quite liked to simply lie down and sleep, but the shouts of the Civil Protection officers from behind the fence and the train caused him to spring to his feet.

"Where'd he go?"

"He jumped the fence!"

"Well, don't just stand there like an idiot! Assemble a team and go around to intercept him!"

Good luck with that, Gordon thought as he ran toward the open doorway, slipping inside and finding himself in a dimly lit hallway. A long staircase proceeded downward, and was lit only by weak, flickering light bulbs placed sporadically along the wall.

Gordon turned on the flashlight on his HEV suit, and suddenly a bright white beam flared from below his ribcage. It cut a swath through the darkness, illuminating the stairs. He descended quickly, his breathing quick and shallow from his dangerous sprint. His body was still tired from his long term in stasis.

As he neared the bottom of the stairs, Gordon heard faint voices. He crept forward, listening intently. One voice sounded rough and angry, the other fearful and desperate.

"Please, I swear, we don't know anything! We didn't â€"

"Shut up, citizen, and get up against the wall!"

"Hey, take your hands off her â€"

Bang. A loud gunshot tore through the silent stairwell. Then a loud, horrified, agonized scream:

"_NO!_"_

Gordon burst around the corner of the stairwell and into a small hallway. Further down the hall, two metro cops were beating a young woman with their batons, who was screaming and crying. Another prone, unmoving body lay at their feet, covered in blood.

One of the metro cops turned as Gordon's footsteps drew neared. "Hey, it's â€" the CP started, when Gordon interrupted him midsentence by swinging the crowbar into the man's throat. The man gave a choked gasp as the steel prongs ripped open his jugular; he crumpled, bleeding and twitching. The other CP pulled out a pistol, but before he could fire it Gordon slammed the crowbar down onto the man's gloved wrist. The CP screamed loudly, dropping the gun with a clatter and backing away, the fabric of his glove ripped away, revealing a flap of torn, bloody skin. Gordon moved forward and swung the crowbar again, into the cop's temple. He crumpled with a groan, either unconscious or dead. Gordon didn't care which this time.

"Oh, God," the woman whimpered, crawling across the bloody ground, not even paying heed to the blood dripping from her forehead. "Noâ€| noâ€|" she crawled up by the dead body next to her. It had been a man once. Now the corpse's head had been blown away completely, rendering it unrecognizable.

The woman began to sob and rock back and forth, cradling the body in her arms. Gordon felt terrible. He had no idea what to say, or do. Then:

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," the woman sobbed. "Thank youâ€| for saving me. But they'll be after you nowâ€| you need to run."

Gordon remained silent.

"There's nothing more you can do here," the woman whispered, tears coursing down her dirty cheeks. "I won't leave him. I don't care what happens to me anymore."

There was nothing else for it. He touched the woman's shoulder briefly in an act of silent comfort, and then jogged heavily toward a stairwell at the opposite end of the hall. He ascended quickly, mechanically. At the top of the stairs, there was only one exit: a doorway, bolted shut. He slammed his crowbar into the padlock, wincing at the loud noise. Soon, the lock broke, and Gordon kicked the door open.

The wind and greyish sunlight hit him in the face as he staggered out onto a rooftop. A loud grating noise was vibrating in the air, indicating that a helicopter was flying overhead nearby. Gordon ducked on instinct, heading to the edge of the rooftop and glancing down. A long railway track stretched out beneath him, vanishing into a tunnel to his left, and continuing onward toward his right. One of those strange blue energy gates was up by the tunnel, blocking his progress.

_Now what? _Gordon wondered as he looked around, thinking. Luckily, at that moment a loud, shrill horn broke through the air, and Gordon peered down the tracks. A train was rumbling towards him, screeching as it did so. Gordon glanced up, and saw a maintenance ladder on the rooftop across from him, stretching down in the air. As he saw the train, he got an idea. A crazy, suicidal idea.

The train let out another loud wail as it slid closer. Gordon tensed, ready to spring, when suddenly he heard footsteps behind him.

"What the â€"

He turned. A Civil Protection officer had come from another door from another part of the roof, and had just spotted him. For a split second, neither moved. Then, Gordon sprinted toward the metro cop at the same moment the CP drew his pistol and fired.

There was a sharp blast of pain, and suddenly Gordon felt as though someone had thrown a brick full force into his left bicep. He gritted his teeth, ignoring the pain, swinging the crowbar at the CP. The steel tip bit into the man's ribs, causing him to stumble backwards, yelling in pain. The gun fell from his hands, landing with a snap at Gordon's feet.

Gordon grabbed the man with both hands and, with a surge of adrenaline-induced strength, hurled him sideways. The injured CP screamed loudly as the force of Gordon's toss carried him over the edge of the roof. The officer fell all the way to the tracks, landing on them with a sickening crunch, and then his screams were cut off abruptly as the train rolled over him.

Gordon turned away, sickened, as the train ripped over the dead CP. Luckily, the train's loud horn drowned out the noise of the man's blood splattering the building walls. Gordon leaned over and picked up the man's fallen sidearm, turning the small USP pistol over in his hand. He then shrugged and checked the clip, gloved fingers fumbling over the smooth metal. It had been so long since he had handled a weapon, yet his fingers seemed to remember the path as they ejected the clip.

Gordon examined it. 17 bullets left. He clipped the pistol to his waist holster before turning back to the tracks. The train had come to a stop. Without pausing to wait for more CPs to find him, Gordon dropped noisily onto the metal roof of the train. He almost slipped off, and he hunkered down immediately, gripping the metal tightly with one hand, and bracing his feet. The ladder to the other roof was only two meters away.

That's nothing compared to some of the things I did at Black Mesa.

With that cheery thought in mind, Gordon took a deep breath, activated his suit's long jump module, and leaped off the train. His fingers hooked into the slick metal of the ladder rungs, and he tightened his grip as the rest of his body slammed into the unforgiving stone of the wall. Gordon grunted at the impact. His fingers loosened from the shock, but he gripped harder, the crowbar and the rungs clenched in his iron grip. Then, with a loud, corrosive grunt, he hauled himself upward, his feet scrabbling against the wall until they found the sweet relief of the rungs. Gordon shimmied up the ladder and hauled himself onto the next rooftop, gasping for breath.

Fucking stasis did a number on meâ€|

There was no time for rest. Sighing, Gordon got to his feet, looking around. The building he was on was much longer than the one he had just jumped from. It stretched out for a while, running parallel with the tracks. He supposed he might as well follow it until he could find a safe place to jump down.

Gordon began to walk along the roof. The roar of the chopper overhead gradually faded into the distance. For a while there was relative quiet, apart from the distant sounds of vehicles rolling through the streets, and the whirr of the city scanners as they floated overhead in black clouds. The roof was lined by a large metal fence, along which large plates of sheet metal were propped up. They glinted in the grey overcast.

There was a flash of black and white at the corner of his vision. Gordon whirled around, pulling the gun from its position at his waist. Four CPs flooded onto the roof across the tracks, pointing at him.

"There he is!"

"Report in!"

"Get him!"

Gordon dove behind one of the plates of sheet metal just as the barrage of gunfire peppered the walls around him. Chips of stone flew out, spiralling in the air. He could hear loud pinging sounds as bullets dented the sheet metal. Gordon checked quickly to make sure the safety was off, and waited for a lull in the gunfire. The second it died down, he sprung upward, aiming across the rooftops.

There was a Civil Protection officer to his right, taking potshots at him from the cover of three barrels and a stack of wood. The officer swivelled to aim at him, but Gordon was already squeezing the trigger, once, twice, three times. The officer screamed as bullets ploughed through his armoured vest, and dark red holes burst across his chest. The officer fell from the rooftops to the tracks below.

Another cacophony of gunfire spit around his head and Gordon ducked back into cover. He peeked out around the left end of the sheet metal, and caught a glimpse of a CP ducking behind a huge blue shipping crate. He waited for the officer to stick his head out, and the second he did, Gordon pulled the trigger. The CP's head exploded like a ripe melon in a sharp flare of pink and white.

One of the remaining CPs began to run along the rooftop, aiming for the cover of another crate on the roof. Gordon got the officer in his sights as he ran, aimed, fired. The man's kneecap spouted blood, and he screamed and collapsed over the side of the roof. Only one more.

The last CP ducked back into the shadows of the rooftop until Gordon could no longer see him. He stared vainly across the tracks, pistol in hand, swivelling it all over the roof, but there was no sign of the officer.

Maybe he ran away?

If only.

Suddenly there was a whistle of air as something small and dark was lobbed at him from the other side of the roof. A small cylinder, looked like a...

SHIT!

Gordon turned and ran like a madman, legs pumping in a blur, just as a tremendous explosion split the air. A searing wave of heat and air pummelled him from behind, lifting him off his feet and hurling him at the fence lining the roof. The force of the blast send him smashing right through the fence, and it creaked and snapped before beginning to peel off the roof. Gordon tumbled off the edge of the roof, crowbar in one hand, gun in the other, as the sky flipped over above him. By sheer, dumb luck, the tip of his crowbar hooked around one of the chain-linked pieces of fence, and then there was a horrible tug as his arm seemed to be yanked right out of its socket. Gordon yelled in agony, and almost released the crowbar, but instinctively he clutched it tighter in his searing, aching arm. The fence continued to peel away, drifting toward the ground, and he was carried with it through the caught crowbar.

The ground was rapidly approaching. Gordon jerked his arm, ignoring the loud protest of pain that his arm voiced, and freed the crowbar from its caught position. He dropped like a stone for the remaining ten feet to the ground, thinking _oh shit this is gonna hurt_ and then he landed on his back in the midst of a pile of wooden crates. Wood splintered and boards tore all around him as pain ripped through his back like a surge of lightning. Warmth began to spread all across his back, and he knew it was blood. The air was forced from his lungs, and he lay, winded, amidst the pile of splintered wood atop the cool, hard earth. Gordon choked, desperately trying to squeeze air into his beaten lungs as the HEV suit slowly began to fix his injuries. All he could see was the grey, emotionless sky overhead as it stared into his face, and the burning wreckage and flaming fence at the edge of the roof.

The pain, sharp and biting, slowly began to fade away. He could not see the Civil Protection officer, but he knew he was there, looking for him, trying to see if he had survived. Gordon willed himself to remain motionless.

A sharp crackle, radio flare, from the rooftop a distance away. He heard indistinguishable noise, then:

"_No, I got him. Hit him with a nade, and he fell off the roof."
_Silence, followed by: _"what the hell are you talking about? I _saw_ him fall. He's done."_ More quiet, only the wind spoke. Then, the voice again, grudgingly: _"all right, I'll get a team and go get his carcass, if it makes you happy."_

Footsteps receded, and then he was alone. "Time to go," Gordon muttered to himself. He fumbled around until he felt the ground under his right hand, and he pushed himself to a standing position. His crowbar was lying several feet away, partially buried in the wooden wreckage. The pistol was a couple meters away from it. He collected both items and began to jog down the train tracks, following the gleaming silver rails until he was swallowed into the darkness of tunnel.

Gordon began to slow down, struggling to control his breathing as he moved stealthily through the tunnel. There seemed to be multiple outposts or stations that lined the edges of the tunnel, providing refuge in case trains came by. Several shadows were moving around

through the glass window of the first outpost, and Gordon caught a glimpse of another white mask.

Fuck, they're everywhere!

He looked around. Many red, flammable barrels lined the edges of the tunnel. A slow smirk grew on his face as an idea formulated in his head.

BOOM

"What the fuck was that?!"

"Go outside and secure the area!"

Gordon ducked into the shadows as a group of CPs thundered into the tunnel, gaping in awe at the flaming mess that used to be a barrel. Gordon charged up behind them, firing. Four of the officers went down with cries of pain. The last one was in the midst of turning when Gordon's bullet slammed into his left eyepiece, and a burst of red shot out and stained the mask. The officer fell.

Gordon quickly examined their bodies, liberating them of all their spare ammunition and clips. Since he didn't have any way to carry the ammo, he hurriedly removed one of the CP's utility belts and fastened it around the orange and black waist of his Hazard Suit. He reloaded his handgun, placed all the spare clips in the magazine pouch on the belt, and then started to run off. As an afterthought, he returned to the dead CPs and stole one of their radios. Might as well know what was coming rather than be taken by surprise.

Gordon looked down the tracks, and to his dismay saw another blue energy gate blocking his path. He turned and sprinted up the steps and into the outpost office, looking hurriedly for a switch to disable the gate. He didn't find one.

God damnit!

Loud voices suddenly drifted down the tunnel. "Units down! Freeman must be here somewhere!"

_Don't they ever give up? _Gordon raged inwardly as he saw a small maintenance stairwell leading upward in the corner of the room. He took it, finding himself on a long metal catwalk that stretched over the train tracks. Suddenly gunfire split the air and bullets began to knock into the catwalk under his feet. Gordon didn't stop to see where it was coming from, and instead booked it across the catwalk, descending the stairs at the other end and ending up on the opposite side of the energy gate.

He looked down the tracks and immediately saw four Civil Protection officers running at him from a distance away, firing at him. They were coming from where the tunnel opened up into the world again. Gordon ducked back, aiming his pistol. The officers were not paying attention to where they were running, and they carelessly passed right by a flammable barrel. Gordon fired.

There was another roar of air and fire as the barrel exploded, drowning out the sounds of the officers' screams. Several charred, flaming bodies were hurled through the air, colliding either with the

walls or the railway tracks with sickening crunches. Gordon took advantage of the clear path to run down the tracks, finally coming out into daylight again.

A chopper was flying by overhead, some point to his left. On his right there was a huge canal, with a large pile of sewer water flowing down next to the tracks. The passage led all the way through a rusted, parted set of long iron bars, to a huge red train car, abandoned in a pile of refuse several hundred yards down the canal. Gordon looked down the tracks and saw several of the huge grey armoured cars screaming towards him. Deciding filthy was better than dead, Gordon took a deep breath and jumped off the tracks.

He hit the water with a loud splash, sending a geyser of the grimy greenish grey water into the air. Gordon submerged, and then the entire world grew quiet. The stench was incredible, and pieces of garbage drifted past him as he began to swim up the river of sewage, lips pressed tightly together as the cold, murky water pressed against him from all sides.

He swam for as long as he could, until his lungs were bursting and on fire. The HEV suit's air gauge listed his oxygen at one dangerous red bar, and Gordon quickly broke the surface, gasping.

Luckily, there appeared to be no CPs on the upper ridge. The whipping of air as helicopter rotors beat across the sky was still present, though. Loud alarms were droning in the air above him as scanners with searchlights flew overhead. Gordon looked furtively around. Taking a deep breath, he submerged again.

As the greenish haze of water slugged against his face, Gordon suddenly became aware of a rushing noise. He whipped around, eyes straining through the water, but he could see nothing but darkness and muck. Then, something long and slimy brushed against his leg.

Gordon recoiled, bubbles escaping from his mouth in a long stream as he jerked his head left and right, searching for whatever had touched him, but he could see nothing through the water.

There it was again! Something sharp, slimy and yielding had touched his foot! Gordon surfaced, gulping in air. CPs or no CPs, he was getting out of there. He had no intention of drowning due to some sick water-dwelling " "

Something slimy wrapped around his foot and yanked, hard.

Gordon was sucked underwater with a choked cry. He squirmed and fought, but whatever was holding him had his ankle in a death grip. His pistol was still in his holster, but even so, the gun wouldn't work underwater. His crowbar, however, was still in his right hand. Gordon swung it sluggishly, stabbing into the slimy thing that had seized his leg.

The hold abruptly loosened, and his foot was free. Gordon began to kick toward the surface madly, lungs screaming. The shimmering light of the surface was so close " three meters " two " one " "

Gordon's face broke into the stinging air, but he only managed to

gulp in one breath before something else wrapped around him and pulled. Gordon felt something cold surround his waist, his left arm, and both his feet. Panic made him dizzy, and bubbles of air were forced out of his lungs as the invisible thing squeezed.

Help me! Gordon tried to scream, but then something sickening and slippery slapped right over his mouth, muffling his cries. What the fuck is this thing?!

Then, he got an answer.

Light suddenly blazed out of the murky sewage swamp, coming in long, tendril-like flashes. Bright, purple dots gleamed in the dark water. Long, whipping blue things fluttered in the water before his face, tapered to points. Gordon's eyes widened as he realized what he was seeing.

They were tentacles.

The things that had grabbed him were luminous, neon-blue tentacles. They were fat and supple, as round and thick as his arm, only infinitely longer. The glowing, gelatinous tentacles were slightly translucent, and the purple light he was seeing were... organs, clearly visible within the clear sheen of the blue tentacles. Each tentacle coiled and waved in the water, their ends thinning until they formed needle-sharp, deadly points. He couldn't see what they were attached to; the tentacles were so long that they simply vanished into the dark water.

The unseen creature wrenched him deeper, pulling him away from the safety and comfort of land and air. Gordon struggled vainly, trying to free himself, but his arms were seized, his legs captured, and a tentacle was coiled around his waist, limiting his movement. Meanwhile, dozens more tentacles were slithering around his fighting form, their sharp tips aimed directly at him. Then, as his heart contracted with fear and pain, the ends of the tentacles opened up. Each point suddenly split wide open, like a peeled flower, revealing strange, miniscule, dagger-like appendages that he knew with a surge of fear were teeth.

Help me! Gordon tried to scream again, but it was useless. Water thundered around his ears and turned his world black as the tentacles surged forward, mouths gaping, ready to swallow him whole.

****A/N:** Thank you to those who have reviewed so far, I appreciate it. The Gordon-Adrian meeting is coming soon, never fear. However it may seem, I will not be directly following the Half-Life 2 storyline, although it will be close. I'd like to hear what you think of this chapter. Click the review button!**

8. Route Kanal: Part I

Water crept into his nostrils and open throat as he trashed in the water, bubbles of air being forced from his gaping mouth. Through dim, hazy eyes, he saw the bright blue tentacles streaking toward him, split into halves by the teeth. So this was it.

What a shit way for this to end, Gordon thought. Typical.

Then suddenly, without warning, the tentacles released him. They began to thrash wildly in the sewage, flipping this way and that, as though in pain. Bright blue light was flashing all around it, almost like lightning. A high pitched keening throbbed through his ears, a sonic pitch that he assumed was coming from the creature. What was happening?

Whatever it was, Gordon wasn't sticking around long enough to wonder. He kicked feebly for the surface, trying to urge strength back into his aching legs. His lungs screamed for air and the surface of the water seemed hazy and distant.

So close now! don't give up! just two more meters! one!

He broke the surface with a loud splash and sucked in air desperately; it filled his lungs with such intensity that he almost screamed in relief. Choking, gasping, he heaved again and again as precious oxygen flooded his system, sending strength back into his watery limbs.

With a surge of dismay he realized the creature was still below him. He swam towards the side of the water, heading towards an embankment of slag and junk. There was a figure up ahead; a green, scaly figure that was not proportioned right. Whatever it was, Gordon didn't care; he'd take castration before going back into the water.

Well, maybe not castration, but perhaps a good kick in the

He arrived on the junk pile with a flurry of water and noise. Crawling forward and out of the water, he collapsed in a heap, breathing raggedly. Sewer water clung to his hair and face, and dripped in rivulets from the dark orange of his HEV Suit.

"It is the Freeman," a deep, gravelly voice said. "We have been waiting for you."

Gordon looked up from the ground to see two dark green, hoof-like feet several inches from his face. Scrambling to his feet, he whipped his pistol out and trained it on the creature before him.

"Be at ease," the thing said. "We serve the same mystery."

Its posture was slightly hunched, and the third arm protruding from its chest waved slightly in the air. The deep red of its eye stared directly into his face.

Slowly, Gordon lowered his weapon. The Vortigaunt nodded just as slowly, clasping its hands together. "You must come with us."

Suddenly, a loud splash drew Gordon's attention back to the sewage lake. Several more tentacles had breached the surface, waving in the air. From below the surface another high-pitched wail was being broadcast, and the tentacles writhed and whirled, aiming their deadly tips right at him.

Gordon raised his pistol and began to fire, stepping backwards in the junk heap as the tentacles arched towards his face. The Vortigaunt stepped forward, raising both arms. "Be gone, into the abyss," it said lowly, and two bright surges of electricity burst from its

hands, flowing outward in a glowing blue arc. The lightning hit the tentacles dead on; the unseen creature below let out a deafening wail as the tentacles quivered and thrashed, before exploding before their very eyes in a burst of blue and purple gore.

Tiny plumes of smoke rose from where the tentacles had previously been. Gordon stepped forward in astonishment, gazing with a new found respect at the scaly green alien. "Thank you," he said. "You saved my life."

"You are the Freeman," the Vortigaunt replied, blinking slowly at him. "The reckoning of the Combine has come."

Gordon felt a sense of unease begin to stir his stomach. "Listen," he said. "Can you tell me what's going on? And how exactly do I get out of here? I need to take the canals toâ€"

"The Freeman must come with us," the Vortigaunt interrupted, loping off along the pile of refuse, towards a rusted red boxcar in the distance. "There is no time for explanations."

Slightly annoyed at the offhand dismissal, Gordon followed the creature. It picked its way around bits of broken, dirty machinery and heaps of burning scrap metal until it reached a small ladder, tucked out of sight next to the boxcar. It scaled the ladder nimbly and dropped through a roof compartment into the car. Gordon, not seeing other options, followed suit.

He landed with a heavy thump in a dirty, tiny space, with no other decoration than a small TV, sitting on a wooden stool in one corner. A man turned around in surprise as Gordon landed, his face haggard with worry. "Good God! You scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry," he said, still feeling confused. The Vortigaunt was hunched in a corner, pointing one arm towards the TV. A burst of green sparks flew from its clawed hand and connected with the TV, which suddenly blazed to life. Gordon blanched. Surely, he hadn't seen â€"? Not _him,_ surelyâ€|

The man looked at Gordon with bright blue eyes, despite the grime that tarnished his face. Short, unruly blonde stubble littered his cheeks and chin. "Guess all those sirens are for you, huh?"

"It would seem so," Gordon said flippantly, stowing his pistol back in his waist holster.

"Good thing you found us," the man said. "You're not the first to come through by â€"

"This is the Freeman," the Vortigaunt interrupted, standing and turning to face them in one fluid motion. "The Vortessence calls us together at last."

"Freeman? _Gordon _Freeman?" the man whispered, eyes widening. Then, he burst out into hearty laughter, causing Gordon to jump. "HA! I knew it! I knew you'd be back one day, Freeman, and now it's true!" He grinned unabashedly. "We'll be able to take the Combine down now with no problem."

Gordon was utterly nonplussed. How did this stranger know who he was?

And why would his presence mean anything in the wake of what had occurred? "I'm sorry, but who are you?"

"The name's Joe," the man replied, thumping his chest. "Otherwise known as Boxcar Joe. Me and Xeron here are just a lookout for the Underground Railroad. Main station is right around the corner. They'll get you started on the right foot." He laughed loudly once more. "Gordon Freeman! I can't believe it!"

"Step forward," the Vortigaunt Xeron said gravely. "Let us pass our strength to you."

Gordon moved closer to the Vortigaunt, somewhat hesitantly. He still wasn't entirely certain about being in close proximity with the creatures, not after what he had endured at Black Mesa. But this one had saved his life, and they seemed to be helping thisâ€¦ Underground Railroad, or whatever it was. And if they were helping other humans, then they were all right by him. Holding onto prejudices now was just going to get him killed.

The Vortigaunt nodded, almost as though it had read his mind. Then it reached out and before Gordon could say "wait" had discharged a blue beam of lightning directly at his chest.

The sensation, while certainly strange, wasn't altogether unpleasant. He felt warmth spread across his body, coupled with the strange tingling feeling one gets when their foot falls asleep. He almost wanted to giggle as the feeling spread to his legs and face. Then, almost as quickly as it had begun, it was over.

"That is all we can spare," Xeron said, lowering his arm. "But it should keep the Freeman safe."

Gordon looked down at himself, prodding his chest gingerly with a gloved finger. "What did you do?"

"Juiced up your suit," Boxcar Joe replied. "Vortigaunts can give a jolt just like the ones the Combine power outlets can. But it takes some out of them, so use 'em sparingly."

Gordon nodded. "Thank you," he said simply to Xeron, and he meant it.

"We serve the same mystery," Xeron repeated. Gordon felt that same creeping sense of unease grow deep within his bones. The Vortigaunt knew. It nodded at him, just once. It knew.

Boxcar Joe opened the side of the car with a loud scraping noise, peering furtively into the grey daylight. "Be careful, Doc. We really can't afford to get noticed. With the Citadel on alert like that, Civil Protection is going to be all over the place. Even more so than usual. And I'm willing to bet my mother's diamond necklace that a lot of it's probably cause of you."

"Does your mother even own a diamond necklace?"

"Well, no. It's a safe bet, this way I can't lose, see?" he grinned, looking years younger, but after a moment his face grew sober. "But all the same, if they catch you down here, it's bad news for the whole railroad. They'll start to tear it up just to get at

you."

Gordon nodded. "I'd better go then."

Boxcar Joe grinned. "Give them an ass kicking."

Gordon stepped out of the boxcar and out into the landfill of broken parts and rubble. "Where do I go?" he asked, turning back to Xeron and Joe. "Which way to Eli Vance's lab?"

"You want Black Mesa East," Joe replied. "It's a dangerous road, but if anyone can make it, you can. Past Station 12 â€" that's just around the corner â€" there's a big pipe you can follow. Go through it and follow it. You'll reach more canals, but just keep going till you reach Station 6. There are more railroad members along the way; they'll help you if they can."

Gordon nodded and took a deep breath. He squared his shoulders and tightened his grip on the crowbar. "Got it. Thanks."

"Get outta here," Joe said, saluting him. "Viva la resistance!"

Gordon grinned and gave a two fingered salute before turning and making his way through the refuse heap. He heard another scraping and then the door of the abandoned train car slammed shut.

I can do this, Gordon thought as he jogged over hills of trash and heavily polluted streams of water. _It's still nothing on Black Mesa, at least not yet._

Shaking his head, Gordon continued through the heaps of trash. The pathway through the garbage was relatively easy to follow, curving around oil canisters and empty containers and dirt-smeared boxes. The "floor" of the passage squished under his feet, a greenish-black sludge that sucked at his boots and tarnished the legs of his HEV suit. He was fairly certain he was in a riverbed of some sort. A heavily polluted, highly filthy riverbed.

As he trudged through the sticky sludge, he came up to a massive sewer grate, tucked into the wall of a large drain tunnel. From the inside, faint red lights winked out of the darkness at several intervals along the pipe, making the watery residue at the bottom look like blood.

How lovely.

Past the grate, the path diverged. It went both left and right. To the left was a massive heap of crushed metal and garbage, complete with a rusted pick-up truck on top of the heap. And to the rightâ€¦

"Wait!"

Gordon automatically ducked lower, hunching into a defensive position and swinging his gun up in the direction of the sound. It was a male voice, one laced with fear and desperation. As Gordon peered into the dark grate, a citizen stumbled out of the reddish darkness, eyes wide and frantic.

"Help me," he gasped. "Please, please help me!"

Gordon took a step forward when a single gunshot rang out. The citizen slumped forward into the bars like a rag doll, blood spraying from the back of his head and splattering the pipe wall beside him. Gordon's jaw tightened as he whipped his pistol into the tunnel, where he could barely make out a glimpse of pale white " the white of a Civil Protection officer's mask.

You monster.

Three squeezes of the pistol trigger and it was over; the metro cop's corpse fell into the sludgy water, contorted in an odd, almost boneless fashion. Gordon heard shouts come from further down the pipe. He ejected the clip from his pistol with harried fingers, loading another as fast as he could. He cocked the gun with a snap and moved out, past the grate and into the open.

And what a mistake that was.

To his right there was a group of CPs, stationed slightly above him on top of a stone ridge overlooking the riverbed. He briefly counted five of them before they saw him. One of them gave a loud cry of surprise, and then they all swiveled to face him. With a jolt of fear, he saw that one of them was standing next to a mounted turret. The muzzle glared at him in the light.

Gordon dived to the side as bullets began screaming all around him, peppering the walls of the drainage pipe with loud pinging sounds. Bright flashes of light danced across the pipe as the bullets bounced off. Columns of dirty green water frothed up around his knees as the mounted rifle spat bullets into the river.

There was an open pipe entrance just a little ways ahead, closer to the CP group. Putting on a burst of speed, Gordon dashed for the pipe, doing his best to ignore the hailstorm of hot lead around his body. One of the bullets clipped his left rib and immediately the wind was driven out of him. The HEV Suit whined in protest.

"_Morphine administered."_

Thank you very much.

Gordon ducked into the pipe with a sigh of relief. Outside, the bullets continued to ravage the riverbed. Not wanting to see what other horrors the CPs would bestow upon him, Gordon followed the pipe deeper into the darkness, rounding a corner up ahead. He came out into an underground room, dimly lit by only two half-moon grates in the wall. Other than the dreary light from outside, the room was almost completely dark.

He wandered through the room, stepping past an overturned table and several mattresses. There was even a sofa, nestled next to the wall and hosting several battery packs. With a tinge of sadness Gordon realized that this meagre hideaway must have been Station 12.

A burst of static lit the room, and then a female voice broke through a radio somewhere in the room, confirming his suspicions.

"_Station 12, come in. Station 12, do you read?"_ A female voice was coming from a table at the far end of the room. He headed over to it. There was a ladder next to the radio, heading upward into the sun. And that wasn't all. Slumped against the wall, which was coloured dark red with blood smears, were three dead bodies. Their faces â€" _oh God, _what _faces?_ Gordon thought sickly â€" were fragments of blood and bone.

"_This is Station 8!"_ a new voice crackled through the noise on the radio, male this time. Even through the radio, Gordon could hear the urgency in the man's tone.

"_I repeat, this is Station 8! We heard 12 go down and out! Surgical strike units are targeting railway stations. Repeat, Civil Protection is coming down on underground stations!"_ Gordon's grip tightened around his crowbar. His fault.

"_We're already getting refugees from 9 and outlying,"_ the man was saying. "_Look's likeâ€"_"_

Then static.

Fuck.

"_Station 8, do you copy?"_ the female voice issued, sounding alarmed. "_Station 8, are you there? We have confirmed reports of Manhacks. Repeat: they are filling the underground with Manhacks!"_

There was another sharp burst of static and the voice tapered off. Gordon was alone again in the dark room. What the hell were Manhacks? Whatever they were, they sure _sounded _friendly. And he couldn't shake the feeling that he was probably going to know more about them than he ever wanted to.

Pushing his glasses up on his nose, Gordon placed his gloved hands on the ladder rungs and began to climb. When he reached the surface he gingerly poked his head out, blinking in the bright sunlight. He was on that stone ridge he had seen from below. The CPs were still there, including the one manning the turret. And they hadn't seen him yet.

And, there was one of those nice flammable containers standing just next to themâ€|

A loud, roaring _whoosh_ of air screamed out as a bright plume of fire illuminated the grey sky. Gordon ducked back down onto the ladder, feeling the wave of caustic heat wash over his head, almost singeing his hair. A split second later a sequence of loud explosions went off somewhere above him, and he realized that there had been more than one of those flaming barrels lying around. The noise was exponential.

He climbed out of the hole, standing in one motion and dusting off his legs. Small bits of flaming rubble littered the ridge. Several burnt body parts had been thrown carelessly into the riverbed; two other flaming limbs were splayed out across the ridge. The stench was terrible. Gordon wrinkled his nose and looked upward, feeling his heart freeze inside his chest.

A huge, hulking, armoured grey van roared to a stop on an overpass situated above the riverbed. It halted at the centre of the bridge, a large turret swivelling at its crown. The van glinted dangerously in the light, its huge, powerful wheels looking like something off a monster truck.

Oh. Fuâ€"

With a corrosive bellow that echoed all across the river, the turret let out a bright white flare. A sparking, slender missile was launched into the air, arcing briefly before levelling down in his direction. Gordon's eyes widened and he dove for cover, covering his head with his arms as the missile collided into the base of the ridge before him.

There was a colossal explosion; several huge chunks of stone and rubble went flying skyward and crashed with a loud _clunk_ into the riverbed, sending up geysers of filth. Gordon scrambled to find his footing, his ears ringing painfully from the blast. No wait, that wasn't just the blast â€" it was a siren. A loud, Klaxon-like alarm was blaring through the city, alerting CPs left and right.

Idiot! Gordon raged at himself as he launched himself towards the mounted turret, which was surprisingly intact in the face of the explosion. _Stupid bloody idiot! Why the hell did you shoot that goddamn barrel? You could have taken all those CPs out quickly and quietly, but _no_, you decided to play fuckin' Rambo and light the goddamn place up like a beacon!_

Gordon grabbed onto the gun and quickly turned it to face the great hulking van. With another bang, it released a second missile, and Gordon opened fire on it. The missile exploded in midair; a bright ball of red and orange blossomed like a flower, sending bits of flaming metal into the river like falling stars. Steam rose in a sharp hiss from the shrapnel.

From the bridge came another small black object: a city scanner, the ones that led CPs to him. Gordon moved the turret and opened fire; the scanner exploded into parts and crashed into the river.

"Hey, there he is!"

A trio of CPs appeared on the left side of the overpass. The mounted rifle bucking in his arms, Gordon released another stream of biting lead, which tore through the officers like Swiss cheese. Bloody, flayed shapes fell into the murky water.

There's too many. Gotta get out. Get away.

The van sparked again and launched another rocket. Gordon abandoned the turret, scooping up his crowbar and booking it towards a long passage on the right side of the ridge, which in the distance bypassed the heap of garbage he had seen from below.

The missile exploded against the mounted turret, incinerating it. Gordon ducked his head as a large hunk of flaming gun went sailing past his head, spinning off the wall and leaving a deep, ashen groove. He heard a screech of tires above him as he passed under the bridge and instinctively knew that another grey car had taken up post there.

_Can't these stupid metro police just _fuck off?

Apparently not. With another blaring explosion, two more rockets landed just behind him, sending a wall of hot air and wind pushing into his back. Gordon let out a frenzied yell as he was propelled forward, past the hill of refuse and directly into a puddle of murky water behind it. He landed face first. Gagging, coughing up dirty water, Gordon staggered to his feet. Grime dripped from his glasses, now slightly askew. Above him, CPs were flooding the bridge. The grey cars launched two more rockets.

Gordon ran for a large tunnel opening before him, clambering in just as the rockets connected with the riverbed. There was a loud _crunch_ as the explosions disturbed some dormant rubble, and the tunnel entrance was buried with a loud groan. Dirt, garbage and stone rained down from above. Then, there was silence.

Breathing hard, Gordon pulled his glasses off and gave them a cursory wipe with his gloved fingers. As he put them on, he realized all he had succeeded in doing was smear the dirt around. Sighing, he hefted his crowbar in his hand and moved off down the tunnel, turning on his Hazard Suit's built in flashlight as he did so.

He followed the tunnel around a sharp curve and then straight for a while. As he walked, he contemplated his situation. Did Civil Protection think he had perished in the blaze of the missiles? If so, he could use that to his advantage. Maybe the patrols they had called out would die down.

Gordon snorted. He somehow doubted it.

"Hey, you!" a loud voice issued from over to his left and Gordon nearly jumped out of his skin. Over here!"

It was coming from a grouping of concrete pipes tucked against the wall. Gordon went over, crowbar at the ready. A slight, pale face peeked out at him from one of the pipes. A woman, young and thin. She smiled grimly at him, brushing hair out of her eyes. "Keep going, friend. Station 12 was raided, but there are others up ahead."

"Are you from the station?" Gordon asked, looking over his shoulder. The woman nodded sadly. "They came right before you did. Something tipped them off; we aren't sure what. They came through the storm grate before we knew what hit us. Killed a few of us, and then the others put up a fight. They were captured and rounded up. And then that bastard gunned them down with the AR2 rifle." Her shoulders were shaking.

Gordon was at a loss. "I'm â€" I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," the woman said quietly, wiping her eyes. "But you need to keep moving. Station 6 is a ways ahead; they'll take care of you. Try to hurry. At this rate, the Combine are going to be coming down hard on the entire railroad. They've already taken out Station 9, we know that much. They're capturing or killing any resistance members they find." She looked at him with dark eyes. "Survive. We need everyone we can get."

He nodded, full of fresh determination. "I will."

She smiled at him once more. "I'm going to stay here in case any others come on through. Got to keep the railway alive."

Gordon looked at her, impressed by her fortitude. Even now, calm in the face of certain death, she wouldn't waver in her duty. But there was nothing he could do to save her; she had made her choice. And he had to make his.

"Good luck," he said quietly.

"Same to you," the woman replied. "Go on."

So he went. He picked his way across the tunnel, heading into the underground, as the faint sound of sirens grew louder over his head.

x x x x

"Okay, favourite novel?" Adrian asked, as they followed the trickling stream of greyish water deeper into the pipe.

Jill smiled. "That's easy. A Complicated Kindness."

Adrian raised his eyebrows. "Really? I wouldn't have you pegged as such a cynic," he teased.

Jill swatted at his arm. "Oh, give me a break. It's an awesome book. It speaks to you."

"Yeah, it stands out," he agreed, wincing as his shoes sunk deep into a pool of muck. "Gross."

Jill gingerly picked her way around it, her hand warm on his arm. "Okay, your turn. Favourite movie?"

"Die Hard," Adrian grinned widely. "Hands down."

She stuck out her tongue at him. "My God, you're such a boy."

He winked at her. "Hey, don't knock it if you haven't tried it."

Jill rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "I have tried it. I just don't see what's so cool about two hours of guns going off."

"Add Bruce Willis to that, you have a recipe for pure awesomeness."

"Oh, of course." They both laughed, and Adrian was almost starting to feel at ease, when Jill's hand clamped down on his arm.

"Adrian. Quiet," she whispered. His laughter withered and died off. Jill was looking apprehensively down the dark tunnel, her pistol pointing out into the unknown.

"What is it?" he muttered, aiming his MP5 left and right. Aside from the steady drip drip drip of water from the tunnel ceiling, he couldn't hear anything.

"I heard something," she whispered. "Radio chatter. I'm almost sure of it."

He peered out into the darkness. "Civil Protection?"

"I think so. Above us somewhere. Let's just... keep quiet," she murmured, motioning her head to indicate they should keep going. Adrian nodded, slowly setting off into the tunnel. As they moved on the tunnel widened into a large, open area, illuminated only by sunlight that filtered through a circular grate in the ceiling. A huge pool of stagnant water took up the entirety of the room. On the wall to their right, another large pipe yawned out of the darkness, just above the water's surface.

"Guess we need to go through there," Adrian whispered. Then a shadow fell across his face Jill squeezed his arm tighter. _Above,_ she mouthed.

He looked up. Two Civil Protection officers had stepped onto the grate, handguns drawn. Adrian shrank back into the shadows, pulling Jill with him. _Go on, keep moving,_ he urged silently. But the officers didn't. Instead, they loitered on the grate, one of them pulling a small mechanical device from its belt.

"I'm getting a miscount for the 647-E sector," the officer said in his garbled, robotic voice. "You read that?"

"Nothing yet. Recheck it," the other replied, looking around. Adrian cursed inwardly and turned to Jill, who was biting her lip indecisively, looking both worried and incredibly appealing at the same time. _We have to sneak by them,_ she mouthed. Adrian nodded. _The water?_ he mouthed back.

She inclined her head slowly. _Just be quiet._

He sighed and, with a furtive glance up to the grate, slowly slid one of his legs into the dark water. It sank deep with a soft noise, but none that the above CPs would have heard. He hoped.

Gently, Adrian eased himself entirely into the water, making sure to hold his gun above the surface. The temperature wasn't shockingly cold, but it wasn't warm either. In three strokes he swam over to the other pipe, softly placing his MP5 on the stone ground with a quiet scrape. He then turned and swam back to Jill. _Come on,_ he mouthed.

"You'll have to hold me up," she whispered in a soft voice. "I don't know if my leg can support me."

"I've got you," he murmured back. "Quickly, before they hear us."

Jill sat on the edge of the pipe and swung her legs toward him, slowly placing them in the water. She exhaled softly as the water crept up to her thighs. Kicking with both legs to hold himself up, Adrian reached out with both hands and grabbed her by the waist, slowly pulling her forward and into the water. She shivered slightly at the contact, and he wasn't sure if it was from the cold or not.

"Let's go," he whispered. She looked into his eyes and he was suddenly very aware that her face was only inches from his own. His hands delicately clutched her petit waist, and her legs brushed against his own as they treaded water. His breathing hitched.

"Jill..."

"Hey, down there!"

Both their heads whipped upwards to see one of the CPs pointing down into the drain. "It's those escapees from Sector 4!"

"Open fire!"

Gunshots burst into the water around them, sending water spraying into Adrian's eyes and mouth. He pulled Jill toward the pipe. "Into the pipe, quick!" he yelled. She placed her hands on the bottom of the pipe and hauled herself up, her clothes sticking to her frame and dripping water. She immediately grabbed the MP5 from the floor of the tunnel and whirled it upward to face the CPs.

"We need reinforcements in 647-E! I repeat, suspects from Sector 4 areâ€"

As Adrian scrambled into the pipe, Jill squeezed off a short burst from the MP5, riddling the CPs with bullets. With the loud, enduring echo of their flat-lining radios, the two bodies slumped against the grate. Blood fell like rain from above, softly pattering against the water's surface.

"Fuck," Jill cursed as Adrian got to his feet and took the MP5 back. "The goddamned masks called for backup. Every CP in the city is going to come down on the canals soon."

"So what do we do?"

"Nothing. We have to keep going. If we can draw them towards us, maybe my father and the others will have more luck making it to Kleiner's." Then her face fell. "Oh. Shit."

"What is it?" he asked urgently. Jill put her head in her hands. "Kleiner. Sector 4 is just around where his lab is located. And that Civil Protection officer said something about us being from there."

Adrian's mind was working fast. "Which means they must have encountered something in Sector 4 to put them on alert."

Jill nodded miserably. "Or some_one. If they think we're from that Sector, then Kleiner's lab is a hot zone now. We have no chance of reaching it without being spotted, and even if we did, we can't risk the Combine discovering it."

Adrian sighed. Another roadblock. "So what do we do?"

Jill's eyes moved skyward for a moment, thinking. "If Kleiner's is out, then our only option is Black Mesa East. It's a lot safer than Kleiner's, at any rate." An errant strand of auburn hair fell into one of her eyes and she blew it away. "Daddy and the others should

have reached Kleiner's by now, so they'll know it's a hot zone. That means they're probably on their way to Black Mesa East right now."

"So we should high-tail it to Black Mesa East, then."

Jill sighed and nodded. "In a nutshell."

Adrian motioned down the pipe. "Then let's get going. But remember, stay close to me. They know we're down here."

They headed on. The pipe wandered and branched, leading them through a long dark tunnel for quite a long time. The water beneath their feet rose and the level grew higher as they went. Eventually, it was up to their shins. As Adrian sloshed through the pipe with Jill at his side, they came to another watery room, with another pipe continuing on the opposite side of a pool. "Through there," Jill said, pointing with her gun. Adrian nodded and together they went into the water.

"There they are!"

Adrian swore colourfully as a group of metro cops appeared in the open ceiling grate. One of them pointed downward. "Quick, hit them with the barrels!"

What the hell's he talking about? What barâ€

"ADRIAN!" Jill suddenly screamed. "DIVE!"

As he looked up, the CPs began rolling several bright red barrels over the edge of the grate. Bright red _flaming_ barrels. And if red barrels had taught him anything over the years...

Fuck.

He dove and Jill followed. She grabbed for his hand underwater and he seized onto her, pulling her deeper into the dark green water. She kicked valiantly with her good leg, and as Adrian went deeper he heard the dim splashes as the barrels hit the water's surface. Then the faint pops of gunshots.

A roiling screech punctured his eardrums underwater as the flammable containers at the surface exploded. Adrian swam deeper, leading Jill along with him. More barrels hit the water and more explosions burst from above.

What now? Can't stay down here forever. But can't surface, we'll be blown to pieces. Gotta be another way...

His eyes scanned the underwater room, stinging from the harsh water. There! Over in the bottom right corner of the room was an underwater passage. He didn't know where it led, if anywhere at all. But it was their only choice.

He pulled Jill's arm and pointed at the tunnel. She understood immediately, nodding and swimming in that direction. Her hair flowed like a red halo around her face. Adrian followed her, kicking his legs powerfully as he swam into the dark pipe.

It was small, cold and claustrophobic. He ignored the cold steel pressing at his body on all sides, forcing his way through the sluggish water. His lungs began to burn, protesting air. He swam harder. There must be an exit somewhere. Somewhere...

Behind him, Jill was flagging. Bubbles of air escaped from her pressed lips and her eyes were narrowed. Adrian reached back and tugged her up against him, holding her body close with one arm and stroking through the tunnel with his other. His legs burned and his lungs were screaming now. Air. Please.

Suddenly the pipe around them disappeared. They had made it through the tunnel, into a long, rectangular room. Adrian kicked for the surface, his chest about ready to explode.

They both broke through the water at the same moment, gasping and heaving deep gulps of air. Adrian shook his head, sending water flying everywhere as he looked around. He spotted another pipeline above the water and swam for it, coughing. Jill followed slowly.

With a wet splat, he hauled himself into the pipe and collapsed on the floor. Jill fell next to him a moment later, breathing hard, eyes closed. Adrian laid his head against the cool steel of the pipe, waiting for strength to come back to his body. After a while, his racing heart began to slow, and his breathing returned to normal. Jill's breathing was likewise growing quieter.

"You alright?" he said hoarsely. She inclined her head once. Her slick red hair was plastered to her scalp and several locks to her forehead, making her look like a wet, glistening sea creature. He reached out and before he even realized it, brushed it away from her face. She opened her eyes and stared at him. "Thank you," she murmured. "For staying with me."

He felt his cheeks starting to heat up and he was thankful that his face was already red. "It was nothing." He pushed himself into a sitting position and Jill did the same. "You have any idea where we are now?"

Jill peered down the tunnel. Up ahead, bright daylight was shining through the distant hole. "We're aboveground again. I'm not quite certain, but I think Station 5 is just up ahead."

"Let's see if they can give us a hand." Adrian stood and offered his hand to Jill, pulling her up. The two set off down the tunnel once more, tired and wet. Adrian just wanted to fall down and sleep. But there was no time for that now.

They emerged into the bright sunlight outside the tunnel, coming into what used to be a canal. It was drained almost to nothing; the water that had previously filled the bed had shrunk to a tiny river in the centre of the canal. The walls were stained a deep green, showing where the water level had originally been. Little bits of trash, crumpled paper, and broken bits of rubble dotted the empty waterway. The sight made Adrian feel strangely forlorn.

Down the canal there was a rickety wooden bridge, hastily constructed. At the bottom, rusted industrial barrels littered the canal. On both ridges, Civil Protection was storming past. Clumps of

citizens were being herded into rough circles and shoved along the sides of the canal. Up ahead, before the bridge, Adrian could see broken furniture and scavenged radio equipment, smashed to pieces. More resistance equipment was being thrown from the bridge by the metro cops, dashing another railroad station to pieces.

"No," Jill breathed as she surveyed the scene. "They got Station 5."

The CPs were now starting to throw the citizens into the grey APCs.

"We've got to help them," Jill said, eyes blazing. "This isn't right!"

Adrian pointed to the right side of the canal. "Go for the ones up there. I'll take out the ones on the left. Ready?"

"Go!"

The duo burst from the pipe. Adrian raised his SMG and fired a quick burst that knocked a CP into the side of the canal, where he left a trail of blood as he was swept to its base. Jill was already firing at the APC, hitting two CPs with deadly accuracy; they fell with cries of pain. The citizens against the vehicle looked down in fear and surprise.

"Run for it!" Adrian yelled, exchanging a volley of gunfire with three other CPs, diving to the right and running for cover behind a pile of rusted metal girders. Bullets sparked off the barrier and Adrian ducked back as the CPs shouted for backup. Jill dove for cover on the opposite side of the canal, ducking behind a protruding pipe. Gunfire peppered the stone near her, sending fragments spinning into the air.

The citizens up above the canal began to run. CPs were shouting left and right, barking orders as they tried to regroup. When the gunfire died down around him, Adrian poked the barrel of his weapon out through the girders and sighted an officer above. The shot took the man in the neck, and a thin fountain of blood sprayed from the wound as the man fell. The spray hit his partner in the face, momentarily blinding him. Adrian took advantage of the distraction to cap the other officer in the chest. His body fell heavily to the canal floor.

Jill reloaded and fired again; another officer dropped in a burst of red. Only four more remained, firing rapidly at them from the wooden bridge. Adrian quickly scanned for an opening, and found one: another flammable propane canister at the base of the bridge's wooden support beams. He jerked his head towards it; Jill nodded from across the canal and fired her gun twice, drawing the CP's attention. As four pistols swerved to face her, Adrian leaped out of hiding and fired three shots.

The bridge was blown to pieces as the propane tank went up, sending chunks of flaming wood into the air like fireworks. Civil Protection bodies and smaller parts went flying in all directions, spouting flames. The lower half of a leg slammed into the girders near Adrian's face. He turned away, disgusted.

When the noise died down, the only remnants of the CP unit were several corpses sprinkled across the canal. Jill slowly eased out from behind her pipe, handgun at the ready. Adrian followed her example, sweeping the area with the barrel of his MP5. They were safe, for the moment.

"Thank you," someone called from above them; Adrian squinted upwards to see a citizen waving at them from the right side of the ruined bridge. "You saved our lives."

"Are you alright?" Jill called up. More citizens were emerging, grouping together at the top of the canal. "Are any of you hurt?"

"No, thanks to you," a man called down. "We're all okay. But we have to get out of here, more CPs are sure to show up soon."

"Where will you go?" Jill asked. "To Station 8?"

The man shook his head. "Station 8 went down about ten minutes before we did. Manhacks got them. It was a massacre."

Jill closed her eyes. Adrian looked at her quizzically and turned away. He wasn't entirely sure what Manhacks were, but their name left little to the imagination.

"Station 6 is the next closest railroad hideout," the man said. "We're going to head there."

"Be careful," Jill warned. "647-E is hot right now. There are miscounts off the charts."

"We'll keep our eyes open," the man responded. He pumped his fist into the air. "The Resistance!"

Jill raised her fist in reply, eyes bright. "The Resistance!" The man and his companions turned away and vanished beyond the canal. Jill turned to him. "We'd better keep moving."

The two made their way past the broken fragments of the bridge and into another darkened tunnel. Adrian heard shrieking tires and sirens from behind them and increased his pace. Civil Protection was replying faster to the reinforcement calls.

Deep through another sequence of tunnels led them to another canal, this one newer and less covered with grime. It was mostly full of old newspaper bits and small pieces of litter.

Adrian turned to Jill. "Which way do you thinkâ€œ"

A dull roar cut his words off as a helicopter floated over their heads, the rotor blades dancing in a blur too fast to be seen. A gust of wind blew the paper outwards in a cyclone as the helicopter moved to hover above the canal, obsidian and gleaming in the afternoon light. Adrian briefly thought that it looked somewhat like a RAH-66 Comanche, but more lethal and deadly. Tinted blue windows at the head of the copter glared down at the two like judging eyes, and a large jet turbine hung just below the helicopter's body. A large pulse cannon was mounted beneath the cockpit.

"Oh, no," Jill whispered, stopping in her tracks. "A hunter-chopper."

The helicopter began to emit a loud, whirring noise. Adrian had a nasty feeling that it didn't mean anything good.

Jill confirmed his suspicions by shoving him into the canal.
"Run!"

Adrian exploded into movement as the helicopter began to fire; thick, high calibre bullets slammed into the canal stone beneath his feet, sending jarring vibrations through his legs. He tore across the canal and the helicopter slowly revolved to face him, firing as it did so. Adrian changed course and headed for the underside of the chopper. If he could get under it, maybe the shots wouldn't be able to get at him

"Don't go under it!" Jill screamed, right as a compartment slid open in the belly of the chopper and a small, circular ball dropped out, about the size of a basketball. The object glinted as it fell towards the canal and Adrian rapidly swerved sideways to avoid it. A loud explosion roared behind him and a wave of hot air punched him in the back, sending his body flying through the air. He slammed into the canal wall some distance away, bruising his right shoulder.

The hail of bullets stopped briefly and the chopper moved forward, heading towards Jill. She waved her hand frantically at a doorway some ways up ahead, in the wall of the canal. Adrian nodded, scrambling to his feet and ignoring the pain searing through his right side. He pumped his legs, heading for the door as the helicopter gave that whirring noise again.

"Look!" he started to shout, but the drone of the bullet storm cut his words off in midsentence. They bit into the ground around Jill, sending chips of stone flying. Adrian felt a surge of panic as she covered her face and hunched over, running as best as she could with her wounded leg.

He raised his gun and began to spray wildly at the chopper, the bullets bouncing off the obsidian beast with no effect. However, it got the chopper's attention. It whirled to face him once more, the bullets gouging a deep arcing pattern across the canal floor. Adrian dove forward and barely avoided the spray as the helicopter turned again, its head lowering to get a clearer shot.

The door was just ahead. Jill shouldered it open and screamed something at him, something he couldn't hear over the roar of noise.

Adrian leapt for the door as the bullets ripped the air where his body had been mere seconds before. He collided with Jill in midair, knocking them through the doorway in a mass of tangled limbs and swearing. They rolled away from the door, into a darkened stairwell; before he could stop himself they went right over the edge and bounced all the way down the stairs, groaning and grunting until they finally lay in a heap at the base of the stairs, bruised and aching. Jill lay sprawled across his chest, her body folded into his own and their legs tangled awkwardly as the sounds of the helicopter slowly faded into the distance.

For a second no one spoke. Then Jill lightly socked his chest and grinned. "Yippee kay-yay, motherfucker."

He stared at her in disbelief for a split second, and they both burst out laughing at the exact same time.

End
file.